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ST. PAUL'S SECOND EPISTLE TO THE THESSALONIANS

REV.
A.R.BUCKLAND,M.A.

A DEVOTIONAL COMMENTARY

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Buckland, Augustus Robert
St. Paul's second epistle to the Thessalonians.

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ST PAUL'S SECOND EPISTLE TO THE THESSALONIANS

A DEVOTIONAL COMMENTARY

By the

Rev. A. R. BUCKLAND, M.A.
Morning Preacher at the Foundling Hospital

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I

THE LETTER AND ITS IMPORT

2 Thess. i. 1.

Paul, and Silvanus, and Timotheus, unto the Church of the Thessalonians.

Possibly in the year 51 St Paul, then at Corinth (Acts xviii. 11), sent to the Christian Church at Thessalonica a letter—our First Epistle to the Thessalonians. The trusted messenger who took that letter to its destination may have returned to St Paul at Corinth. Let us assume—it is a natural assumption—that he did. He would, of course, bring news with him—possibly letters from converts—certainly some account of things as he found them.

2 Thess. i. 1. Origin of the Letter.

St Paul's language in 1 Thessalonians enables us to understand something of the anxiety with which the return of that messenger was awaited, and something of the interest which his news would have for the Apostle. The Thessalonians were his 'glory and joy' (1 Thess. ii. 20); in his prayers he recalled their 'work of faith, and labour of love, and patience of hope in our Lord

St Paul and the Thessalonians.

2 Thess. i. 1.

Jesus Christ' (1 Thess. i. 3); so remarkable had been the transformation wrought in them by the Gospel that they had become 'ensamples to all that believe in Macedonia and Achaia' (1 Thess. i. 7); they were full of missionary zeal (1 Thess. i. 8), and at the same time abounded in 'brotherly love' (1 Thess. iv. 9); they were, indeed, 'children of light, and the children of the day' (1 Thess. v. 5).

It is easy to understand the solicitude of an Apostle for such a Church, and the anxiety with which he would await letters or verbal report as to their circumstances.

St Paul's Anxiety: Its Causes.

It may have been from such letters, or from such report, that St Paul heard of things which gave him renewed anxiety. There was still cause to thank God for the Church at Thessalonica, tried as it was by persecution (i. 3, 4); but he heard of certain dangers. There was a matter of faith. A rumour was current that 'the day of Christ' was come upon them (ii. 2). High authority was claimed for this rumour—the language used by the Apostles, perhaps even a forged letter claiming to be from St Paul. This development had to be checked.

The Reasons for Action.

In the interest of the Church at large it was important that no false and misleading views upon so vital a subject should pass unchallenged.

Allowed to grow in Thessalonica, they would soon spread to other Churches, more especially to those which had viewed with admiration the witness borne by the Thessalonian converts (1 Thess. i. 8). The very zeal of the Church would give the greater authority to any distinctive views which came to be associated with it; and the noble witness borne at the first would be turned to the support of unsound doctrines. 2 Thess. i. 1.

But it was also necessary to act in the interests of the Church at Thessalonica. That Church was full of promise. But, if evil ran on unchecked, the error of a few might infect the many, and the moral deterioration which marked the minority might spread through the whole community of Christian people.

Nor was it less necessary to act in the interest of individual souls. Each of them was precious to St Paul, and very much more precious to St Paul's Master. The eternal welfare of men and women was at stake. They had been 'called out of darkness'; the Apostle could not stand by and see even a few brought again into captivity without an effort to save them.

For, as usually happens, the question of doctrine had become also a question of character and of morals. There were matters of conduct which

2 Thess. i. 1.

also called for notice. Some of the brethren—whether as a result of the rumour as to the Coming, or from a general unfaithfulness—had grown careless in conduct, idlers and busybodies, and so were a grave danger to a Church planted in the midst of enemies and exposed to persecution. This also had to be dealt with.

The three missionaries—Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy — lost, we may suppose, no time in dealing with the matter. They had no superior officers, no representative body, to consult. They could act on their own responsibility, and they did. The Second Epistle to the Thessalonians was the result.

The Letter and its Character.

In it we have a letter, written during the eighteen months' ministry at Corinth, on the second missionary journey of St Paul, and so between the years 49 and 53. It is worth remembering that modern discovery has brought to light letters from men of the world, on the ordinary affairs of life, written much about the time of these Epistles to the Thessalonians. Their style and language show that St Paul followed the style and diction of his day.

We are going, then, to read one of the earliest of the New Testament books, and one of the shortest of the letters of St Paul which have come down to us. We must read it in relation

to another letter—1 Thessalonians. For we can with safety assume both the Pauline authorship of the two letters and their traditional order. In the Second Epistle the history of the Thessalonians is carried a little farther; a misunderstanding of what had been preached and written as to the Second Coming is corrected; the spirit of disorder, detected earlier, is more sharply rebuked.

2 Thess. i. 1.

Looking broadly at the letter (apart from more intimate inquiry), we may find in it:—

Three Lines of Teaching.

(1) A record of the exercise of *apostolic authority* as to creed and conduct. As to creed, see especially ii. 1, 2, 3, 5, 15; as to conduct, iii. 6, 10, 14, 15.

(2) An example of *apostolic teaching* as to one of the loftiest of themes, the Second Coming (i. 7-10; ii. 3-12); and as to one of the simplest, the duty of work (iii. 6-12).

(3) A witness of *apostolic concern* for recent converts, acknowledging their testimony (i. 3-5); reaffirming God's concern for them (i. 5-7; iii. 3); praying for them (i. 11, 12; ii. 16, 17; iii. 5, 16, 18).

Or the letter may speak to us of:—

(1) The *danger of false doctrine,* arising early in a Church, claiming authority, and presenting itself with boldness (ii. 1-12).

2 Thess. i. 1.

(2) The *influence of false doctrine*, in threatening to divide a Church, and producing decay in the private conduct of such as receive it (iii. 6-15).

Or, again, we may remark :—

(1) Some *trials* of the Christian life—contact with persecutions from without (i. 4), and unfaithfulness within the Church (ii. 2 ; iii. 6).

(2) Some *consolations* of the Christian life—the happiness of witnessing for God (i. 4, 5), the certainty of His righteous judgment (i. 6, 10), the assurance of His protecting care (iii. 3).

A Lesson for the Times.

The Epistle, short as it is, and restricted as it is in subject matter, seems to have, in its general character, a definite message for our own time. It is absolutely inconsistent with the comfortable theory that dogma is of no particular consequence. The letter is full of dogmatism—dogmatism about the great purposes of God; dogmatism about things which some would assure us are merely matters of pious belief; dogmatism about social duty; dogmatism about ecclesiastical discipline. It may be good for us to be reminded that St Paul was not afraid of dogma. He knew what he believed, and he stated his belief firmly. The two characteristics—clear apprehension of truth and courage to affirm it—are sorely needed now, as they have been in other ages of the Church.

Suggestions for Prayer.

2 Thess. i. 1.

Whilst we think on these or other things, let us pray—

(1) For wisdom to try our belief by the standard of Holy Scripture (*cf.* Isa. viii. 20).

(2) For grace to apply in our own lives warning supplied by the failure of others (1 Cor. x. 11).

'Blessed Lord, Who hast caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning; Grant that we may in such wise hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that by patience, and comfort of Thy holy Word, we may embrace, and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which Thou hast given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.'

II

THE CORRESPONDENTS

2 Thess. i. 1.

Paul, and Silvanus, and Timotheus, unto the Church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

2 Thess. i. 1.

St Paul at Corinth.

Somewhere [1] in the city of Corinth, in the year 51 or 52, or thereabouts, was a house in which one Aquila, a Jewish tent-maker, lately come from Italy (Acts xviii. 2), lived and carried on his occupation, with Priscilla his wife. St Paul knew the same trade, and with these two he lodged, working with them for his daily support, and carrying on evangelistic enterprise in the house of Justus, who lived near the synagogue.

Aquila and Priscilla.

It has been disputed whether St Paul was drawn to Aquila by community of belief or merely by community of race and occupation. Aquila had been driven from Rome by the Claudian decree of A.D. 52. He was expelled because he was a Jew, but he may also have been amongst the early converts at Rome. It

[1] For another treatment of the opening verses of the Epistle, see the author's *Devotional Commentary on* 1 *Thessalonians* (R.T.S., 2s.), pp. 11-15.

is at least probable that Aquila was already a Christian when St Paul lodged with him. Certainly the close intercourse with the Apostle in Corinth meant much for Aquila. When the stay of St Paul ended, Aquila and Priscilla went with him as far as Ephesus. They afterwards returned to Rome (Rom. xvi. 3, 4), and then to Ephesus again (2 Tim. iv. 19). 2 Thess. i. 1.

The decree which banished Aquila and Priscilla from Rome may have seemed to them a cruel stroke. What earthly loss it laid upon them we cannot tell, but modern affairs easily enable us to supply some of the details. Yet this misfortune, as it appeared for the time, fell out to their spiritual advantage. God had work for them to do for St Paul, for Apollos (Acts xviii. 26), for the Church at Corinth and Ephesus, as well as at Rome. God's Way for them.

'How blest to all Thy followers, Lord, the road
By which Thou lead'st them on, yet oft how strange!
But Thou in all dost seek our highest good,
For Truth were true no longer, could'st Thou change.
Though crooked seem the paths, yet are they straight,
By which Thou draw'st Thy children up to Thee,
And passing wonders by the way they see,
And learn at last to own Thee wise and great.'[1]

To Corinth there had come from Macedonia two friends of the Apostle. One, Silas, was, like Silas and Timothy.

[1] Gottfried Arnold, 1666-1714, trs. Winkworth (*Lyra Germanica*).

2 Thess. i. 1.

St Paul, a Roman citizen, and, like St Paul, had already made his mark in the infant Church (Acts xv. 22, 27, 32). The other, Timothy, was a recent convert, in whose veins the blood of Jew and Gentile mingled (Acts xvi. 1); who had, however, come on his mother's side of a stock that feared God (2 Tim. i. 5), and had been reared accordingly (2 Tim. iii. 15).

The Work at Corinth.

The work of the trio at Corinth prospered. In the public life of the place—with its business interests, its mixed population, the coming and going natural to a seaport—small stir may have been made. Even an appeal to the deputy of Achaia (Acts xviii. 12) may have excited little general attention. It was merely a matter of religious controversy (Acts xviii. 15). Few men of distinction and influence in the city were converted (1 Cor. i. 26); the Church was rather gathered from the profligate and hopeless (1 Cor. vi. 9, 10, 11). But we are familiar with the fact that a spiritual work of deep and lasting importance may for the time obtain little notice from the general public. The man of the world, whether in London or New York or Calcutta or Peking, is often unaware of the spiritual enterprise industriously pursued at his own doors. His ignorance does not prove its non-existence, though he sometimes thinks it does.

The Correspondents

From a busy life, tent-making and preaching, from the midst of opposition and strife, Paul finds time to reflect on the news from Thessalonica. The three evangelists doubtless took counsel together, and then the letter was written and sent in their common name. 2 Thess. i. 1.

The Bond of Friendship.

They were colleagues in the ministry of Jesus Christ. As between them all there must have been the bond of friendship—between Paul and Timothy a friendship of that peculiar tenderness which sometimes subsists between an older and a younger man, between a teacher and guide and a learner and follower. Friendship, says Emerson,[1] 'is for aid and comfort through all the relations and passages of life and death. It is fit for serene days, and graceful gifts, and country rambles, but also for rough roads and hard fare, shipwreck, poverty, and persecution.' So these proved it. Is there any friendship more sweet than that which springs and grows in the common service of God?

The Church at Thessalonica.

The missive went to a little Church in another busy city; to a Church containing converts who were Jews (Acts xvii. 4), and converts who had been pagans (1 Thess. i. 9); to a Church that knew the cost of coming to Christ (1 Thess. i. 6; Acts xvii. 5-9), and was not daunted thereby.

[1] *Essay on Friendship.*

2 Thess. i. 1.

The Hidden Great.

If you and I had entered Corinth that year, and had inquired as to the amenities of life there, we might have learned a good deal as to its social advantages. There were men of wealth there, men holding high office, men of wide interests, and men of much learning. Art, literature, and philosophy had their followers. But of the general population probably no one would have given a thought to the obscure enthusiast whose religious opinions so strongly excited the Jews of Corinth. Yet the obscure Jew was in fact the greatest man in Corinth, the one bearer of a name and a message for all ages.

Not so far away, too, at Thessalonica, who cared for the little group who worshipped the crucified Jesus? Yet they have made Thessalonica more famous than its commerce. There is, indeed, a distinction which is above those the world can give. In a very real sense the humblest believer can be a great man.

Fellowship with the Mighty.

'Paul and Silvanus and Timotheus'—a noble trio. We cannot reach their standard of achievement. Yet we may be like them in some small degree—in *community of grace*, called by and knowing the same Lord whom they honoured; in *community of labour*, serving Him as they did in seeking to win others to His kingdom; in *community of trial*, suffering for our witness, and

very full of anxiety for those whom we would help; and in *community of joy*, waiting for the same ultimate reward. 2 Thess. i. 1.

Not all may serve in the high places of the field, not all rank with Paul, or Silas, or Timothy. Yet all can bear witness, and speak for their Master. And as for the wider field, through others one may be a messenger to the Eskimo and the Maori, the Chinaman and the Red Indian, the naked savage of Central Africa and the polished Rajput rejoicing in an ancestry of long centuries. There is no lack of opportunity for service, if to serve we are minded. Can we in sincerity use the language of another German poet?[1]— Room for all.

'The light and strength of Faith, oh grant,
That I may bring forth holy fruit,
A living branch, a blooming plant,
Fast clinging to my vine—my root:
Thou art my Saviour, Whom I trust,
My Rock,—I build not on the dust,—
The ground of faith, eternal, sure.
When hours of doubt o'ercloud my mind,
Thy ready help then let me find,
Thy strength my sickening spirit cure!'

Suggestions for Prayer.

Let us pray, then, for grace more fully to realise:—

[1] Sinold, 1720, trs. Winkworth (*Lyra Germanica*).

2 Thess. i. 1.

(1) The blessings of Christian fellowship;
(2) The dignity of Christian witness;
(3) The responsibility of Christian privilege; and
(4) The comfort of Christian hope.

'O Almighty God, Who hast knit together Thine elect in one communion and fellowship, in the mystical Body of Thy Son Christ our Lord: Grant us grace so to follow Thy blessed Saints in all virtuous and godly living, that we may come to those unspeakable joys, which Thou hast prepared for them that unfeignedly love Thee; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.'

III

TWO GREAT POSSESSIONS

2 Thess. i. 2.

Grace unto you, and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

How poor and conventional other greetings seem beside those with which St Paul opens his letters to those he trusts! For he begins with a prayer that certain blessings may come upon his correspondents. Here they are 'grace' and 'peace.' 2 Thess. i. 2.

A whole world of meaning lies in that one word 'grace.' Doubtless St Paul in such a connection used the word as implying in its widest sense the favour of God, the kindness natural to a God Who can be called 'Our Father,' and to a Lord Who is our Saviour. As besought for the Thessalonians, we may see, more especially in grace, the idea (1) of *pardon*, 'grace' suggesting the spontaneous exercise of God's love to man, disclosed in all His dealings with His people, but especially in the ministry of His Blessed Son, so that by His grace men are 'called' (Gal. i. 15), 'saved' (Eph. ii. 8), 'justified' (Rom. iii. 24), Grace.

2 Thess. i. 2.

and empowered for the Christian life of service (1 Cor. xv. 10).

And further also, in view of their special conditions, grace may have suggested to them (2) the idea of divine favour as a *protection and support.* So the Apostles were 'recommended to the grace of God' (Acts xiv. 26; xv. 40), and so others were invited to 'find grace to help in time of need' (Heb. iv. 16).

Implications.

He who desires the 'grace' of God for another must, like St Paul, have certain clear convictions as to man and God. He must see in man a fallen being, lost save for the goodness of God, and quite unable of himself alone to compass his own salvation. In other words, he must believe in sin as a grim reality, an offence against God, an offence that merits death. But he will also see in God One Whose justice is not more exacting than His love is abundant, Who 'was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them' (2 Cor. v. 19). He will therefore rejoice in the thought both of pardoning grace and of protecting grace.

Peace.

With these two views of 'grace,' 'peace' goes in complete accord. When men know themselves thus to be the subjects of divine grace there is peace both as to the thought of their eternal salvation, and as to the necessities of life

and duty from day to day. Their welfare, they know, is their Father's concern; their peace is 'the peace of God.' 2 Thess. i. 2.

Despair and its Cure.

Now in the promises suggested by these two words lies the strongest comfort man can find. The devout soul is sometimes cast into great misery. It falls upon a time of doubt, from what cause I will not stop here to inquire. But the doubt, the uncertainty, the gloom are very real and very full of anguish. How strange that the enlightened mind can ever consent to harbour them, when God's Book is full of the promises of His grace and His mercy — both freely bestowed, both inexhaustible!

In some of the saddest lines in our language Shelley wrote:—

'Alas! I have nor hope nor health,
Nor peace within, nor calm around,
Nor that content, surpassing wealth,
The sage in meditation found,
And walked with inward glory crowned—
. . . . .
Yet now despair itself is mild
Even as the winds and waters are;
I could lie down like a tired child,
And weep away the life of care
Which I have borne, and yet must bear,—
Till death like sleep might steal on me,
And I might feel in the warm air
My cheek grow cold, and hear the sea
Breathe o'er my dying brain its last monotony.'

2 Thess. i. 2. Faith and Prayer.

Now contrast the words of another, Christina Rossetti, who (in *A Better Resurrection*) suggests at once the remedy for such gloom in the Christian soul:—

> 'I have no wit, no words, no tears;
> My heart within me like a stone
> Is numbed too much for hopes or fears;
> Look right, look left, I dwell alone;
> I lift mine eyes, but dimmed with grief
> No everlasting hills I see;
> My life is in the falling leaf,
> O Jesus, quicken me.'

'My soul cleaveth unto the dust' is the cry, but not all of it—'Quicken Thou me according to Thy word' (Ps. cxix. 25).

Where the world tastes despair, the devout soul, if it will but look at God as well as itself, finds comfort in the message, 'Grace be unto you, and peace, from Him which is, and which was, and which is to come' (Rev. i. 4). 'Grace and peace . . . from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ'—there is no possible combination of circumstances to which such divine consolation is not equal. The treasure is always in existence; it is but our blindness, our wilfulness, or even our passing loss of faith, that keeps us from claiming it as our own.

Suggestions for Prayer.

2 Thess. i. 2.

So let us pray:—

(1) That 'the grace of God that bringeth salvation' (Titus ii. 11) may be realised by us, and by all near and dear to us;

(2) That we may in all fulness realise the Saviour's promise of peace (John xiv. 27);

(3) That we may be ready to witness of this peace before the hearts that need it.

'Almighty and everlasting God, Who dost govern all things in heaven and earth; Mercifully hear the supplications of Thy people, and grant us Thy peace all the days of our life; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.'

IV

A DUTY NOT TO BE NEGLECTED

2 Thess. i. 3.

We are bound to thank God always for you, brethren, as it is meet.

2 Thess. i. 3.

It may have been whilst St Paul was awaiting at Corinth the return of his messenger to Thessalonica, that an exalted (though not unexampled) experience befell him. He had found the Jews of Corinth obdurate. They received his message in opposition and blasphemy; he replied by a solemn renunciation of responsibility as to them, and by the declaration—'From henceforth I will go unto the Gentiles.' God had consolation for him; Crispus and others believed. But more than this, the Lord 'spoke to Paul in the night by a vision,' in such words as might have strengthened the most anxious (Acts xviii. 9, 10).

A Message from the Lord.

It is in the moment of heaviest trial that God often reveals Himself most clearly to His suffering servant. It is when the narrow human outlook seems most unpromising that God often has at

hand the richest blessing. But the servant must wait in faith. 'Obey the word,' says Ruskin,[1] 'in its simplicity, in wholeness of purpose and with serenity of sacrifice . . . and truly you shall receive sevenfold into your bosom in this present life, as in the world to come life everlasting.' So it was with St Paul. 2 Thess. i. 3.

It may have been just at this period that the further tidings came from Thessalonica—tidings which, if they had elements of disappointment and anxiety, also gave the Apostle occasion for great joy. In much at least of the news there was a tonic for drooping spirits. What mattered suffering and disappointment at Corinth, if his Master could say of Corinth, 'I have much people in this city' (Acts xviii. 10); and if at Thessalonica old converts were standing fast in the faith? News from Thessalonica.

Looking at the facts, and noting the peculiar value to him of the news just then, the Apostle sees in it one more sign of God's goodness to him. He owes a special debt, he is under a religious and moral obligation (*cf.* the use of ὀφείλω in Rom. xiii. 8; xv. 1; Eph. v. 28; Heb. ii. 17, and other passages) to God for what He has done amongst the Thessalonians. The facts were solid enough. The growth of faith and the Cause for Thanksgiving.

[1] *On the Old Road*, ii. § 297.

2 Thess. i. 3. growth of love were real. Belief and conduct went hand in hand; and so he was 'bound to thank God.'

'Non nobis, Domine—.' St Paul is in no doubt as to his own duty in the matter. As for himself, he is proud of his spiritual children (i. 4). But their steadfastness and their faith are not his work; they are the work of God. To God, therefore, be all the glory. We do not always find it easy thus to put self out of sight, and to see in God alone the source of blessing, so that 'neither is he that planteth anything, neither he that watereth; but God that giveth the increase' (1 Cor. iii. 7). Unhappily, there are only too many things that conspire to make a modern preacher of the Gospel forget this fact. Public attention, private praise, the signs of some measure of success, suggest to his mind that in his own power—his personal magnetism, or his learning, or his eloquence, or his industry, or all of these combined—lies the cause of prosperity.

So, again, in the case of great organisations for religious and philanthropic work, it is easy to fall into the error of ascribing their usefulness to their management, their organisation, the zeal of their agents, or the multitude of their supporters, and leaving the power of the Holy Spirit in the background.

St Paul shows a nobler way. Is there sign of spiritual blessing? Then it is the Holy Spirit Who has been working, and so we are 'bound to thank God.' i. 3.

'Bound to thank God.' How often we go from day to day, from hour to hour, without much clear, joyous realisation of gratitude to God! And then, suddenly, it comes—and the greatness of His mercy again overwhelms us. It is as though we had found something new, something wonderful as well as new. We have rediscovered the goodness of God, and each, like Keats (over a smaller matter) might say— Discovering a Duty.

> 'Then felt I like some watcher of the skies,
> When a new planet swims into his ken.'

But we ought not to stand in need of any such rediscovery of a constant fact, and every fresh recognition of its existence should suggest some measure of self-reproach.

St Paul, however, made no new discovery; nor was he thankful merely upon his own account. He felt 'bound to thank God.' Yes; but not merely on the ground of God's goodness to himself, but also for the work of grace in his Thessalonian converts.

How often are we thus moved for the spiritual concern of others? Our sympathies get so Rejoicing in others' Zeal.

2 Thess. i. 3. narrowed to the limits of our own communion, our own parishes, our own congregations, that we forget to note the mercies God is scattering elsewhere. Or, if we mark them, it is too much in relation to our organisation, placing this to the credit of a Church, and that to the credit of a society, and another thing to the credit of a worker. Shall we not try to look beyond the means and the workers to 'God that giveth the increase'?

Cowley wrote of a friend who lived

> 'With as much zeal, devotion, piety,
> . . . as other saints do die.'

But—

> 'Still with his soul severe account he kept,
> Weeping all doubts out ere he slept.'

If we examined ourselves with the same strenuous care, how much more often we should feel 'bound to thank God,' and that for others as well as for ourselves!

Suggestions for Prayer.

Therefore let us pray:—that 'we may indeed know the love of Christ' (Eph. iii. 19), and being 'stablished in the faith' may abound 'therein with thanksgiving' (Col. ii. 7), on behalf of all who are being 'called unto' the 'Kingdom and glory' of God (1 Thess. ii. 12).

A Duty Not to be Neglected

'We beseech Thee, Almighty God, mercifully to look upon Thy people; that by Thy great goodness they may be governed and preserved evermore, both in body and soul; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.' 2 Thess. i. 3.

V

UNSELFISH JOY

2 Thess. i. 3.

Because that your faith groweth exceedingly, and the charity of every one of you all toward each other aboundeth.

2 Thess. i. 3.

The Thessalonians under Trial.

The further tidings received by St Paul from Thessalonica may have gone into many details. If they came by a messenger, he would, we may suppose, have much to say of his own experiences —where he lodged, whom he had seen, to whom he had talked. There would be news, no doubt, of individuals, more especially of those upon whom the sorest trials had fallen. Possibly it would be told, not only that the leaders of the flock had stood firm, but also that some, who were deemed only weaklings, had grown into clearness of conviction and firmness of belief. Then the news might declare that in other ways character had developed under trial, more especially in regard to mutual consideration and support. Perhaps, under the pressure of common trouble, the estranged had been brought together; social barriers had been broken down; patience,

forbearance, helpfulness one of another, had been shown to an unexpected degree. 2 Thess. i. 3.

So much may, without hazard, be inferred. For such are, almost invariably, the results of persecution upon the persecuted, where they stand fast. Misfortunes often drive the worldly apart, whilst they draw the godly together.

Joy at their Constancy.

Conceive the joy which such tidings must have brought to their 'father in God.' He makes no concealment of it; he is proud to declare it. But the joy is unselfish joy. He does not think of the evangelist as magnified by their triumph; he is thankful and proud for and because of them.

All the details he is content to sum up in two causes of thanksgiving—the increased faith and their mutual love. Of their faith St Paul had been anxious (1 Thess. iii. 5). But Timothy had reported well, not only of their faith, but of their love too (1 Thess. iii. 6). Now it seems that there has been no check, no failure in the face of hostility; faith has strengthened and love abounds, and that in the absence of their great teacher, in the presence of severe trial, and whilst some difficulties (hereafter to be discussed) have arisen in the Church.

—But no Self-Praise.

So, for the moment, St Paul will only speak of joy and gratitude. How simple, how sincere, are his words! He is frankly glad at the good

2 Thess. i. 3.

news. He is frankly proud of his children in the faith. But there is no hint or suggestion of evil complacency, of pride in himself. Their steadfastness and the fruitfulness of the Thessalonians did not make St Paul think what a great man he was. In a poem full of self-abasement,[1] F. W. Faber wrote:—

'My very thoughts are selfish, always building
Mean castles in the air;
I used my love of others for a gilding
To make myself look fair.

I fancy all the world engrossed with judging
My merit or my blame;
Its warmest praise seems an ungracious grudging
Of praise which I might claim.'

That was a piteous cry which others may have echoed. The desire of praise, the enjoyment of praise—which so often breed further evil in a morbid belief that the world is jealous or unjust—are besetting sins which sorely try many a man and woman who is anxious to live for God. But how little of so poor a spirit is anywhere suggested in the self-revelation of St Paul!

—And no Narrow Outlook.

And, as there was nothing selfish in St Paul's joy, so also there was nothing narrow in his view of its origin. In the Church at Thessalonica there were elements of disorder alike as to belief and as to conduct. Yet St Paul, for the time, puts

[1] *Self-love.*

the thought of these aside, to write of the whole Church as rejoicing his heart. 2 Thess. i. 3.

The Society and the Individual.

We sometimes forget the society in the shortcomings of the individual; forget to thank God for the sum of faith and love in remembrance of those who fall away. Perhaps, in the weakness of our natures we find it easier to mark the faults of a few than to rejoice in the virtues of many. St Paul shows us a more excellent way. It is not that he under-estimated the gravity of such bad news as came from Thessalonica; his language, when he comes to deal with it, is too definite, too severe, for any reader so to misjudge him. But he understood the wisdom as well as the duty of dealing fairly with men, and the harm that can very speedily be done by an indiscriminate scattering of blame. He knew too—for who was more ready to give it?—the worth of encouragement. And so for the moment he will take the Church as a whole, and allow the fidelity of the many to outweigh the weakness of the few.

No Novelty in the Tidings.

Again, the news which drew out his gratitude had no great novelty. It is what St Paul had learned from Timothy; but he does not make light of it on that account. Alas, we ourselves are sometimes like the Athenians in the craving for novelty (Acts xvii. 21). We miss the privilege of rejoicing over the faith that remains firm,

2 Thess. i. 3.

just because it is familiar and we know all about it. We want to be interested in the story of new triumphs. The instinct is right, because we ought to be seeking for new conquests; but this must not be to the neglect of the old. The craving for novelty for novelty's sake is never more unhealthy than in the religious life.

A Precious Combination: Faith and Mutual Love.

Faith and the 'charity of every one of you all toward each other'—truly a precious combination. They are one in belief, one in mutual service. How the picture rebukes many modern conditions! Of how many communities of Christians could St Paul's words be used? Faith is not allowed to be the unifying power it might, is not allowed to produce brotherhood as it should. The sense of fellowship is blunted by social distinctions, perhaps also by our own absorption in other affairs and by our own selfishness. Yet faith and charity so often go hand in hand in St Paul's letters. Perhaps he may lead us out of ourselves into a larger life and ampler love to the brethren.

Are we drawing nearer each other?

Perhaps happier days are coming for the Christian Church. Of talk of reunion there has long been much; now we begin to know deeds as well as words. There has been a drawing together within Churches that were divided. In the mission-field, more especially in China,

there are manifest yearnings for real and active co-operation between the scattered forces of Christendom. Everywhere men talk of joining hands. It is well. Disunion has long enough made it hard for the non-Christian man to understand and receive the appeal of the Christian Church. 2 Thess. i. 3.

Suggestions for Prayer.

Let us pray:

(1) For all believers young in the faith, that they may be kept steadfast not only in belief, but in the offices of mutual help and sympathy.

(2) For ourselves, that we may grow less self-centred, wider in our sympathies, more ready, both to 'rejoice with them that do rejoice, and weep with them that weep.'

(3) For all Christian people, that they may come to 'hold the faith in unity of spirit, in the bond of peace, and in righteousness of life.'

'O God, the strength of all them that put their trust in Thee, mercifully accept our prayers; and because through the weakness of our mortal nature we can do no good thing without Thee, grant us the help of Thy grace, that in keeping of Thy commandments we may please Thee, both in will and deed; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.'

VI

'WE GLORY IN YOU'

2 Thess. i. 4.

So that we ourselves glory in you in the Churches of God for your patience and faith in all your persecutions and tribulations that ye endure.

2 Thess. i. 4.

Competition and the Churches.

Competition is, in some of its aspects and results, one of the saddest features of modern life. It is, in its application, so hard to reconcile evenly with the brotherly love which should mark the Christian estate. But competition is at its worst when Church contends with Church. It must be the unceasing effort of every pure and noble spirit to see that the endeavour to excel in faith and in good works never becomes the mere strife of contending organisations, working for their own praise, and not for the glory of God. Yet, just as competition is inevitable in the ordinary affairs of life, so also it is certain that Church will be compared with Church and congregation with congregation. It must be our business to see that this is done in charity, that we may provoke one another to emulation (Rom. xi. 14), that it is restrained within just

limits, and that the true purpose for which every ecclesiastical organisation exists is never allowed to fall out of sight. 2 Thess. i. 4.

How to 'Glory over' others.

Here St Paul helps us. He tells the Thessalonians that he glories over them 'in the Church of God,' letting others know of their character and work, praising them before others. It was an exceedingly difficult and delicate task; and we may well believe that so much was felt by St Paul himself. Does he not say in a memorable passage, 'God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ'? But there he speaks of the purpose of Judaisers, who would win a paltry triumph by securing the circumcision of Gentile believers (Gal. vi. 13, 14). So also he says (1 Cor. iii. 21), 'Let no man glory in men,' where he deprecates pride in wisdom, or in a reputation for it. There is, moreover, the general warning of 1 Cor. i. 29.

The Fit Occasion and the Right Manner.

But even so St Paul recognises the fitness of some measure of 'glorying' for the right cause and under the right circumstances. The key to the right cause and circumstance is found in 2 Cor. x. 17, 'He that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord.' Under this general restriction would come his declaration to the Corinthians (2 Cor. vii. 4), 'Great is my glorying of you,' and on the other hand the confident assertion to the

2 Thess. i. 4.

same Church, 'We give you occasion to glory on our behalf' (2 Cor. v. 12). The cause of all such rejoicing is a desire to recognise the work of God in some life or lives; the occasion is one upon which the 'glorying' may help others.

So it is with the case of the Thessalonians. They were St Paul's 'glory and joy' (1 Thess. ii. 19, 20). And he is ready to tell other Churches of their merit, just as he spread before the Macedonians the liberality of the Corinthians (2 Cor. ix. 2). In doing this he is not violating his own law, 'Let no man glory in men'; for, rightly considered, it is not man that is exalted; it is the power of God working in man. No doubt it needs much grace for anyone, even a St Paul, thus to praise others; for praise is a stimulant that soon flies to the head. But St Paul knew his correspondents.

—And the General Advantage.

The note of personal affection is heard in his words, 'We ourselves' glory in 'you.' The matter is one of their common concerns. But there is the suggestion also of something almost like a public duty. St Paul bears witness of them 'in the Churches of God.' Others shall learn what the power of the Holy Spirit has enabled men to do at Thessalonica. The facts may help others, and they ought to be known.

Does there lie here something of a rebuke to

us? The outside critic occasionally girds at religious organisations for 'parading results.' When 'results' are not paraded, then he accuses them of having none to produce. His inconsistency reminds us that we need not concern ourselves overmuch with his attitude. Our main business is with persons of a more open mind. In regard to these it may be that we are, as a matter of habit, too reticent. It might be well for us to use less reserve, to make a bolder acknowledgment of what the triumphs of the Gospel are. We are almost too self-restrained; we do not claim for the Gospel of our Lord all that it has done and is doing. Secularism thunders its claims all around us, and Christianity in its presence is abashed and apologetic. A little more confidence and a little more boldness in testimony, are due from us.

2 Thess. i. 4.

A Time to Speak Out.

May we not also find here an appeal of another sort? Could the Thessalonians read this passage or hear it read, and not feel that, in giving joy to St Paul, they were, in the best of ways, repaying him for his labour? He thought much of them. Were they not to think of him? He had been a blessing to them. Could they not be a blessing to him? Now much of the ecclesiastical life of to-day seems arranged on the understanding that certain men, definitely set apart for the purpose,

Teacher and Taught—Mutual Blessing.

2 Thess. i. 4.

are to minister to the people in certain areas, or united in certain community, and in return are to receive from them fixed or varying payments. But are these payments all the return that can be made? Can the people not also give to the ministry the joy of knowing that their work has not been in vain? Is it a small thing for the people thus to refresh and stimulate those who have been set over them in the Lord? Do they keep in mind the influence which their own faith and their own conversation may have upon those who labour for their souls? St Paul, at least, would not have his converts forget it.

Suggestions for Prayer.

(1) Let the Psalmist help us with two suggestions for our prayers:—

'Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity' (Ps. cxxxiii. 1).

'I will praise Thee, O Lord, among the people (Ps. cviii. 3).

(2) Let St Paul also help with the plea of 1 Thess. v. 12, 13: 'We beseech you, brethren, to know them which labour among you, and are over you in the Lord, and admonish you; and to esteem them very highly in love for their work's sake.'

'We Glory in You'

'Almighty and everlasting God, give unto us the increase of faith, hope, and charity; and, that we may obtain that which Thou dost promise, make us to love that which Thou dost command; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.' 2 Thess. i. 4.

VII

THE IMPORT OF TRIBULATION

2 Thess. i. 5.

Which is a manifest token of the righteous judgment of God, that ye may be counted worthy of the kingdom of God.

2 Thess. i. 5.

The Lesson of Steadfastness.

As the fire kindled round a martyr died down; as the flames flickered out and the ashes fell together, and a charred stake with a pendent chain alone remained where a little while before a man or a woman had stood, some observer may have asked, 'What was the good of this sacrifice?'

What is the lesson of the steadfastness of faith under the sorest trials that man at his worst can inflict upon a fellow-man?

The Martyr's Triumph a Portent.

St Paul suggests an answer which might not occur to all. A martyr's death, or the patient sufferings which did not end in death, may be defended as a necessary witness to personal conviction; as a protest against indifference as well as against base surrender of the truth. But St Paul also explains it as a foreshadowing of God's judgment. This constancy under trial comes from Him; the support He gives, the triumph over

suffering which He assures, witness that He has marked the sufferers as His own, and will care for their future. So in the case of the Philippians, confidence in the face of adversaries is presented as an 'evident token' to the sufferer of 'salvation, and that of God' (Phil. i. 28). The martyr's triumph becomes a portent, solemnising to as many as believe with him; and very full of warning to the adversary. 2 Thess. i. 5.

—And a Foreshadowing of Glory.

For this judgment of God on the sufferer's behalf looks on to a glorious consummation. All the sorrow and all the suffering are, to the sufferer, for an end—that he 'may be counted worthy of the Kingdom of God.' The world at various times, and in various places, has spurned its choicest spirits. Every recital of their names and their sufferings may end with this tribute—'Of whom the world was not worthy' (Heb. xi. 38). But those whom the world so rejects, those whom the world is not fit to retain, have another distinction. God counts them 'worthy of the kingdom,' the kingdom 'prepared' for them 'from the foundation of the world' (Matt. xxv. 34). Their Saviour Whom they followed, taking up their cross (Matt. x. 38), in Whose strength they have stood firm, even in some Sardis, will confirm His promise—'They shall walk with Me in white: for they are worthy'

2 Thess. i. 5.

(Rev. iii. 4). Can we not believe that, in the joy of that new life, the sufferings of the earlier time will indeed be counted 'not worthy to be compared with the glory' revealed in them (Rom. viii. 18)?

'Counted worthy of the Kingdom of God'—what more could servant of the Master desire? How poor in comparison seem the things for which men toil and strive! For the one is eternal; the others are fleeting. Yet because the honours of the world are visible and tangible, and the reward hereafter is prospective, some will deem the latter of small account. Their judgment will be otherwise in the day when men shall give account before the Lord.

The Contrasted Ends.

How different the prospect of the two classes, as the end draws near! What, in the closing hours of life, can have been the consolations of the persecutor? What support or comfort can have come from the memory of torment inflicted, of bodies maimed and lives cut short? Even cruelty in a lesser degree—acts of uncharity, of injustice, of pique or petty malice—what comfort can they minister to the mind contemplating the hour of death and the day of judgment?

How different the passing of the faithful, the sweet confidence of the trusting soul, the conviction that, through the love of the Father and the merits of the Son and the work of the Spirit,

all must be well! The entrance into the promised 'kingdom' is assured; the place prepared is ready, whatever in the wisdom of God it may be. So the faithful may cry with Whittier:— 2 Thess. i. 5.

'Be near me when all else is from me drifting,
Earth, sky, home's pictures, days of shade and shine,
And kindly faces to my own uplifting,
The love which answers mine.

I have but Thee, my Father! let Thy Spirit
Be with me then to comfort and uphold;
No gate of pearl, no branch of palm I merit,
No street of shining gold.

Suffice it if—my good and ill unreckoned,
And both forgiven through Thy abounding grace—
I find myself by hands familiar beckoned
Unto my fitting place.'

Suggestions for Prayer.

So let us pray:—

That we may understand the 'fellowship' in the sufferings of our Master (Phil. iii. 10).

That in suffering, we may remember the promised glory (Rom. viii. 18).

That we may never forget our source of support under trial, the One 'Who comforteth us in all our tribulation' (2 Cor. i. 4).

'That it may please Thee to succour, help, and comfort all that are in danger, necessity, and tribulation,

'*We beseech Thee to hear us, good Lord.*'

VIII

SUFFERING AND WAITING

2 THESS. i. 5.

THE Kingdom of God, for which ye also suffer.

2 Thess. i. 5.

The Gate of Tribulation.

'THAT we must through much tribulation enter into the Kingdom of God,' was the assurance of Paul and Barnabas to the brethren of Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch (Acts xiv. 22). In the infancy of the Christian Church the truth came home, perhaps without exception, to every Christian believer. Each knowing the temper of his own city or countryside, and the circumstances of his day, would recognise it as inevitable. Perhaps, even before written Gospels were passed from hand to hand, one of the best-remembered sayings of our Lord may have been the warning, 'In the world ye shall have tribulation' (John xvi. 33). The Acts of the Apostles, with the Epistles of the New Testament, present, vividly enough, evidence that the prediction of our Lord was fulfilled. As time went on there were general persecutions, and there were local and individual persecutions. So in

Early Persecutions.

the history of the Reformation, and in the circumstances of modern missionaries, there have been persecutions prevailing over wide areas, and persecutions that were, in a manner of speaking, insignificant and individual. 2 Thess. i. 5.

But what, to the ordinary member of a Christian Church in a civilised land, corresponds to the 'tribulation,' affliction (θλῖψις) of the early Christian? Modern Equivalents.

Some sheltered lives may escape every such test in any severe or definite form. It is not difficult to think of those who have been born and reared in an atmosphere of serene piety; who have escaped close contact either with intellectual doubt or moral perversity. Faith has entailed upon them no inner struggle, no conflict with adverse circumstances, no witness-bearing before the quietly contemptuous or the openly scoffing, no family differences, and no social trials. —Escaped by some.

Is it well to envy their estate? In such serenity lurk many dangers—the danger of lukewarmness, of being 'neither hot nor cold,' and coming under condemnation (Rev. iii. 16); the danger of accepting such a state as normal, and possibly shrinking from duty which might entail difficulty and trial; the danger of doing less than justice to others whose lives are cast in the

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2 Thess. i. 5.

harder places; the danger of lacking sympathy with the tempted and afflicted.

—Endured by others.

But to many more the profession and practice of a robust faith entails some measure of suffering. Let us not despise that suffering as insignificant because it does not come with the horrid menace of rack or stake. For some could be brave before an Inquisition who would shrink from the jeer of a friend, and some would stand unflinchingly a public trial who would fail miserably before a trial that was essentially personal and private.

—In many Forms.

But the tribulation may be real enough. It may imply *domestic unhappiness*, in a breaking away from family custom or views of what is right and fitting. A man's foes may still be they of his own household (Matt. x. 36).

It may imply *financial loss*, in the refusal to fill an office associated with dishonest practices. A few years ago the columns of a religious journal were crowded with letters from shop-assistants protesting against 'tricks of the trade' they were called upon to employ. No person can excuse the practice of dishonesty, by saying that it is done at the command of a superior.

It may imply some *social disadvantages*, where definiteness in religion is condemned, much as

the enthusiasm of Evangelicals in the great revival of the eighteenth century was abhorrent, not only to the materialists, but also to the formalists of the day. 2 Thess. i. 5.

In fine, some measure of suffering for the faith that is in one is not so uncommon as to let us view the sufferings of bygone saints in a merely academic spirit.

The Special Danger of our Age.

But we shall do well to remember that each age has its own trials. If we escape tribulation in the form of acute persecution, we may have other trials that will at least as surely test our sincerity. Perhaps our great peril is not that we should deny Christ when challenged, but that we should, in a spirit of indolence, or from deference to a spurious liberality of spirit, let go something of the truth delivered to the saints. What they would not resign under threat of torment or death, we must not hand over at the challenge of a plausible latitudinarian or a scoffing secularist. Perhaps some minds may find in the conflict with the one or the other or both enough of trial to make for them a 'great tribulation.' These dangers may increase; such trials may, as years go on, grow more frequent, more urgent in the Christian Church; but 'he that endureth unto the end, the same shall be saved.'

2 Thess. i. 5.

'One to another hear them speak,
The patient virgins wise:
"Surely He is not far to seek—
All night we watch and rise.
The days are evil looking back,
The coming days are dim;
Yet count we not His promise slack,
But watch and wait for Him."'[1]

Suggestions for Prayer.

Let us pray:—

(1) For the strength to be faithful under trial;

(2) For grace to take affliction in the spirit that may speak to the onlooker;

(3) For joy in recalling the sure promises of God. 'And He saith unto me, . . . Behold, I come quickly; and My reward is with Me, to give every man according as his work shall be' (Rev. xxii. 10, 12).

'Grant, O Lord, we beseech Thee, that the course of this world may be so peaceably ordered by Thy governance, that Thy Church may joyfully serve Thee in all godly quietness; through Jesus Christ our Lord.' Amen.

[1] Christina G. Rossetti, *Advent.*

IX

GOD AND THE PERSECUTOR

2 Thess. i. 6.

Seeing it is a righteous thing with God to recompense tribulation to them that trouble you.

2 Thess. i. 6.

There has grown up a view of God which, extolling His love, in effect denies His justice. God's Justice Ignored. God is to forgive; He is not to punish. You may talk of a hereafter in which men are to find forgiveness and peace. But you must not speak of a hereafter in which men are to find condemnation and punishment. You may paint in detail the wonders of heaven, so far as imagination may extend the intimations of Holy Scripture. But you may not so much as whisper the name of Hell. For there is a modern view of God which makes Him no longer a Judge.

The Root of this—Selfishness.

It can readily be understood that such a view appeals to human nature. It must inevitably commend itself to those who fear the justice of God; but it also finds support in a natural shrinking from the infliction of pain. There are many who cannot bear to think of any imposition of serious punishment in this life. They

2 Thess. i. 6.

would rather leave a wilful child to self-ruin than undertake measures of restraint or correction. They would rather see a life go on in smooth self-deceit and easy self-indulgence than find a friend brought up suddenly by the heavy discipline of physical pain. It is—little as this may be suspected—a form of selfishness. In any case such an attitude of mind easily leads to unbelief in a future which includes punishment as well as reward.

Sentiment rather than Conviction.

Perhaps this view is not, in most cases, a reasoned belief; it is rather a vague impression based upon sentiment and upon personal inclination. But, whatever its cause and whatever its character, it has undoubtedly helped to produce a singularly one-sided and misleading view of the divine nature. For, as I shall presently suggest, it fastens upon God a permanent injustice of administration.

The certainty of Future Punishment.

Into the character of future punishment, its extent and limitations, it is unnecessary here to go. The point before us is the certainty of such punishment. It is no new doctrine as stated by St Paul. The vivid picture drawn by our Lord (Matt. xxv. 41-46) must have been familiar to every member of the primitive Church; for no such discourse could have failed to leave its impression on those who heard it, and to be

repeated to others. Nor can any ingenuity explain away the certainty of such discrimination against the evil-doer as is there described. 2 Thess. i. 6.

St Paul, however, is not here dealing with the general question. His point is not the punishment of the evil-doer at large, but the punishment of the Thessalonian persecutors. Two things are made plain—(1) the persecutor will be punished; (2) the punishment of the persecutor will be just.

The Persecutor will meet his Reward.

(1) The persecutor shall at the last meet with his due reward. Our own view of affairs is so short that we desire to see justice done in this present life. An Ahab and a Jezebel must always come to violent ends, and the requital must be 'in this plat' (2 Kings ix. 26). A Herod, having vexed certain of the Church, must be 'eaten of worms' (Acts xii. 23). A Nero must always come to be a fugitive, and place a dagger to his own throat. The authors of the St Bartholomew massacre must always come to violent ends. A Mwanga must invariably lose his throne. The undiscovered and unconvicted criminal must eat out his heart in secret alarm, and early find a miserable death. In fine, poetic justice must be done in this present life.

—But not always in this world.

Now in life it is not so. The offender is not always punished as public opinion would require.

2 Thess. i. 6.

Even Jezebel lived a long life before the blow fell. She survived Ahab by ten years, and saw two sons, Ahaziah and Jehoram, in succession ascend the throne. Catherine II. of Russia, one of the most profligate women of any age, had a long and prosperous reign, dying at the age of 67. Catherine of France, another woman of infamous memory, died at 70.

So it is in ordinary life. Calculated dishonesty is often seen to prosper. Consistent looseness of life does not always bring any apparent retribution in its train. A considerable proportion of known murders are never traced to their perpetrators; and it is the opinion of experts that many other murders are committed, but remain undiscovered.

There remains a Future.

Thus in this life virtue does not always receive its due reward, and evil is not always punished. So then, if in this life only the administration of divine justice were to be seen, that justice would be most imperfect. The evil-doers might laugh at the preacher of righteousness, and protest that he sinned with impunity. The belief in the justice of God inevitably therefore requires a belief in the life of the world to come, a life which is a future state of rewards and punishments, a life in which the inequalities and injustices of this present life will be rectified—and not rectified

according to human estimate, but according to the unerring judgment of God. 2 Thess. i. 6.

(2) 'It is a righteous thing with God' thus to deal with the evil-doer. It is not merely the vindication of divine justice. It is also a dispensation which, because it is looked for and feared, works out to the advantage of man. It acts as a deterrent, perhaps to a far larger extent than men are willing to acknowledge. And it restores the confidence of minds disturbed by seeing the wicked in prosperity, whilst the godly may suffer at their hands. The Final Administration of Justice salutary.

Both of these facts need to be kept in mind. The same disposition which leads men to avoid all thought of future punishment naturally induces them to undervalue the influence of such a prospect. But it is a matter of common observation that fear does exercise some restraint upon many natures, and the prospect of future punishment is not without its value. Love they may despise; it does not move them. Fear they understand; punishment they understand; and they respect them. The ordinance is to them one of mercy.

Moreover, the belief in a future state of reward and punishment removes the doubt left in many minds by the existence of unpunished crimes, as well as by the sufferings of the godly. There *is*

2 Thess. i. 6.

to be a time of readjustment and requital. Lazarus shall one day sit within the palace of the King, and not at the gate of Dives. This is no mean, envious, jealous thought; no narrow, vengeful wish to see another suffer. It is only the serious conviction that justice must be done, that justice will be done, and that without violence to our belief in the love of God.

But Mercy still waits.

To the living man the punishment of the future world is still in the future. In the present the voice of mercy still cries, 'Let the wicked forsake his way, . . . and let him return unto the Lord, and He will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon (Isa. lv. 7).

Suggestions for Prayer.

Let us ask for:—

(1) Patience and self-control.

'Fret not thyself because of evil men, neither be thou envious at the wicked' (Prov. xxiv. 19).

(2) Long-suffering and faith.

'Say not thou, I will recompense evil; but wait on the Lord, and He shall save thee' (Prov. xx. 22).

'That it may please Thee to forgive our enemies, persecutors, and slanderers, and to turn their hearts;

'*We beseech Thee to hear us, good Lord.*'

X

GOD AND THE PERSECUTED

2 THESS. i. 7.

AND to you who are troubled rest with us.

THE justice of God is not one-sided. If it assures retribution to the evil-doers, it equally assures recompense to the faithful servants. The nature of the recompense is characteristic—'rest' (ἄνεσις), here relief from tension, abatement of the strain of a struggle, the relaxation of the old effort, then to be no longer called for. It is a word only used five times in the New Testament; here, in Acts xxiv. 23, 2 Cor. ii. 12, vii. 5, and viii. 13.

2 Thess. i. 7.

Justice to the Sufferer.

'Rest' is, perhaps, a misleading rendering; it suggests a condition of definite repose as contrasted with occupation, and it is not the Apostle's meaning. What he asks the Thessalonians to think of is relief from the pressure of persecution. He therefore offers no encouragement to belief that the life of the world to come must needs be a condition of passive enjoyment. He does not

'Rest.'

2 Thess. i. 7.

exclude the idea of active employment. The poet[1] who sang—

> 'Rest for the weary hands is good,
> And love for hearts that pine;
> But let the manly habitude
> Of upright souls be mine'—

would not be in conflict with St Paul. The Apostle here offers no guidance on the point. He is only concerned to say that the same God who will punish the persecutor will give to the persecuted relief from the strain of the old conditions. In the future life, they shall realise the truth of Job's forecast—'There the wicked cease from troubling; and there the weary be at rest' (Job iii. 17).

A Precious Promise.

In a way this promise is exactly that which so many, in our own time, will deem the most precious. The strain of life is so severe, in its conflict with temptation as well as with the calls of positive labour, that rest in the sense of relief from pressure offers them one of the things they most need and desire. The Christian may say—

> 'I do not ask, O Lord, that life may be
> A pleasant road;
> I do not ask that Thou would'st take from me
> Aught of its load.'[2]

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[1] J. G. Whittier.

[2] A. A. Procter, *Per Pacem ad Lucem.*

But even so the believer, ready to 'wait patiently' for the Lord in Whom he rests, may look on with hope to the assured 'rest from . . . labours' (Rev. xiv. 13), and own the blessedness of that promise. 2 Thess. i. 7.

A Glorious Reunion.

To these intimations we may add another which St Paul here brings before us. The promised rest is 'rest with us.' In his consideration of the future life he is led to suggest a social element. For there is put before us here something more than identity of reward. 'Rest with us' is not merely the 'rest which Silvanus, Timotheus, and myself will enjoy'; it is 'rest in our company,' as, in 2 Cor. iv. 14, 'God . . . shall present us with you' indicates the appearance of Apostle and converts together. They shall meet—those who suffered together, those who rejoiced over one another. They shall meet where they will be secure from interruption—in the presence of their common Lord.

The thought is not without its special comfort. Apostle and convert, teacher and taught, raised up together and found together in the new life, make a vision that gives a new happiness to the prospect of the world to come. To community of faith and community of suffering there is to be added community of reward.

But with the thought of prospective joy comes

2 Thess. i. 7. But will all be there?

another. *Will any be missing* from that assembly —any over whom the teacher yearned, for whom the teacher prayed; any once participants in spiritual privilege, once sharers of the common hope? That is a question to put to ourselves. To it we can give no certain or final answer. We dare not sit in the judgment on others' past; we cannot pierce the future or discern ahead the destinies of our neighbours. We may fear, we may be anxious, we may rejoice with hope; but we are not God. Yet this is a question—is it not?—to quicken our sense of responsibility, to remind each that in a very real sense he is his 'brother's keeper.' It is a question that suggests a new weight in the responsibility of friendship and kinship, and association in the common intimacies of life. God forbid that we should cause any to come short of that 'rest with us'!

Suggestions for Prayer.

Two passages from the Psalms may well suggest the tenour of our prayer and thanksgiving—

'Now know I that the Lord saveth His anointed; He will hear him from His holy heaven with the saving strength of His right hand' (Ps. xx. 6).

God and the Persecuted

'I know that the Lord will maintain the cause of the afflicted. . . . Surely the righteous shall give thanks unto Thy name: the upright shall dwell in Thy presence' (Ps. cxl. 12, 13). 2 Thess. i. 7.

'We humbly beseech Thee, O Father, mercifully to look upon our infirmities; and for the glory of Thy Name turn from us all those evils that we most righteously have deserved; and grant, that in all our troubles we may put our whole trust and confidence in Thy mercy, and evermore serve Thee in holiness and pureness of living, to Thy honour and glory; through our only Mediator and Advocate, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.'

XI

THE COMING AND ITS PURPOSE

2 THESS. i. 7-10.

WHEN the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels, in flaming fire taking vengeance on them that know not God, and that obey not the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ: who shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of His power; when He shall come to be glorified in His saints, and to be admired in all them that believe (because our testimony among you was believed) in that day.

2 Thess. i. 7-10.

THE coming of the Lord for the punishment of evil-doers and the vindication of His people is further developed. Let us mark:—

He Who shall come.

(1) *The Person who shall come.* It is the Lord Jesus. When, as here, the Apostle deals with the triumphant return of his Master, he speaks of Him in terms which at once suggest His humiliation in His earthly name, His office as Saviour, and His divine power. 'Jesus is Lord' (1 Cor. xii. 3), and His Lordship shall be manifest to those who rejected as well as those who received Him.

How He shall come.

(2) *The manner of the Coming.* It is a revelation of the Lord Jesus from heaven, with His

mighty angels, in flaming fire. The coming is indeed a revelation (*cf.* Rom. ii. 5 ; 1 Cor. i. 7) —a manifestation of His true personality and of His proper majesty, unspeakably joyful to His own, and unspeakably terrifying to those who doubted, neglected, despised, and rejected Him. It is a revelation from heaven, whence He came 'for us men and for our salvation,' whither He had gone with the promise of return (Acts i. 11), whence His people looked for His reappearance (Phil. iii. 20). He comes with the angels, who are the instruments of His power, as predicted by Himself (Mark viii. 38), and with a flame of fire, the emblem of divine anger. 2 Thess. i. 7-10.

(3) *The purpose of the Coming* is the rendering of all that justice demands in the case of evil-doers ; 'vengeance' having no sense of passion or vindictiveness, but indicating that measure of retribution which God alone can dispense (Deut. xxxii. 35). This retribution falls upon 'them that know not God, and that obey not the Gospel'—specifically the pagans of Thessalonica, and those, whether pagans or Jews, who, hearing the message of the Gospel, refused to accept it. No inference need be drawn as to the purpose of God in regard to the heathen at large. He has before Him the persecuting element at Thessalonica. There paganism was a sin against What He shall do.

2 Thess. i. 7-10.

some measure of light, even if the Gospel had never been preached to its people; but there, as a matter of fact, the Gospel had been preached, and by some hearers definitely rejected. Their sin was a deliberate hostility to the truth of God, and an organised endeavour to crush out an infant Church.

The End of the Evil-doers.

(4) *The punishment of the evil-doers.* Their 'end is destruction' (Phil. iii. 19), destruction from—apart from—'the presence of the Lord,' a loss of blessedness which is 'everlasting,' corresponding to the awful sentence of Matt. xxv. 46. And this punishment is contrasted with the blessedness of the saints. Instead of destruction, the saints have salvation; instead of banishment, the enjoyment of the divine presence; instead of shrinking from 'the glory of His power,' they bring glory to Him (John xvii. 10).

Future Punishment: A false Charge.

The terrible prospect for the unrepentant here presented by St Paul is sometimes made the ground of a charge against Christian people. It is suggested that they look forward with joy to the day when divine vengeance will be executed; that they gloat over the prospect of others' sufferings. But did any one of us ever meet any sincerely Christian man or woman who thus viewed the question of future punishment? Have we ever known any one who thus rejoiced over the prospective agony of others?

On the contrary, is it not the Christian man or woman who feels the deepest concern, who is most zealous to save others from so grievous an end? Justice will demand punishment hereafter, as justice, when effective, insists on punishment now. But it is one thing to recognise the necessity of such punishment; it is another thing to rejoice that any will be punished. 2 Thess. i. 7-10.

If we are to be examined as to tenderness of heart, who is the truer friend—the worldling who allows a neighbour to live in unconcern about God or open defiance of God, or the man of faith who, at the risk of rebuff, tries to warn the sinner of his peril? The True Test of Mercy.

No; the things at issue are too serious for us to allow any misunderstanding on this point. The language of the Apostle is not to be explained away. The coming of the Lord must indeed be for His enemies an event as terrible as the vivid language of Isaiah ii. and Rev. vi. would suggest. The happiness of the redeemed, then finally vindicated before the world, lends the greater emphasis to it.

How great the responsibility, then, of all believers! It is not for them to sit down in contented enjoyment of their own spiritual privileges and in blissful contemplation of their own promised future. St Paul sets their duty The Responsibility of Believers.

2 Thess. i. 7-10.

before them—in season and out of season they should be seeking the lost, if by any means they may save some. Do we indeed live with 'loins girt about and lights burning,' as servants that wait for their lord? Do we find occasion to spread before the careless not merely the warnings of Holy Scripture, but also the gracious invitations of the Gospel? Do we put them in mind of God's patience with us?—

'The Lord in love delayeth long
The final day, and grants us space
To turn away from sin and wrong,
And mourning seek His help and grace.
He holdeth back that best of days,
Until the righteous shall approve
Their faith and hope, their constant love;
So gentle us-ward are His ways!' [1]

Suggestions for Prayer.

Let St Luke's Gospel suggest our prayers:

'Watch ye therefore, and pray always, that ye may be accounted worthy to escape all these things that shall come to pass, and to stand before the Son of man' (Luke xxi. 36).

'Be ye therefore ready also' (Luke xii. 40).

'In all time of our tribulation; in all time of our wealth; in the hour of death, and in the day of judgment,

'*Good Lord, deliver us.*'

[1] Rist, 1651, trs. Winkworth (*Lyra Germanica*).

XII

THE LORD AND HIS PEOPLE

2 Thess. i. 11, 12.

Wherefore also we pray always for you, that our God would count you worthy of this calling, and fulfil all the good pleasure of His goodness, and the work of faith with power: that the name of our Lord Jesus Christ may be glorified in you, and ye in Him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.

2 Thess. i. 11, 12. The Needs of the Faithful.

From his vision of that great day in which the faith of the Lord's followers shall be vindicated to the full, St Paul is carried to prayer for them. The end is so wondrous in its mercy as well as its judgment that the mind of the observer feels quite naturally the needs of those who are still under trial. For the Thessalonians the battle is not yet over, the end not yet reached, the service to which they are called not yet fully performed.

The reminder is needed, doubtless, by them—is needed by us all. Every victory of grace may give rise to a subtle temptation. Something has been done, or not done; a duty performed under difficulties, a trial endured, an obstacle surmounted, a temptation resisted. Then comes the reaction after effort, or a tendency to self-

2 Thess. i. 11, 12.

confidence, or the foot of pride comes against us, or the very power of the grace of God may be turned against God, by our coming to think less of our difficulties.

Continuous Grace needed

That is the moment of danger, that the crisis at which the Accuser has won many a victory, not to be gained when the tempted one was on guard. Rightly does St Paul show his converts that their courage and their constancy in the past do not place them beyond the need of continued grace. They still lack many things; there is still much for them to do; they can glorify their Master yet more. And so St Paul prays for them.

—For Work.

There are two main subjects of his intercession. There is (1) *the continued work of God* in them. In his prior letter the Apostle had, as a father to children, urged them to 'walk worthy of God, Who hath called you unto His kingdom and glory' (1 Thess. ii. 12). Of this calling he prays that God may deem them worthy, and fulfil in them that which is appropriate to goodness and possible to faith. The true servant is to realise that he is a servant; and not only to realise the dignity of his position, but also to regard his work as his Master's work, done under His authority, by His power, and for His glory; for no meaner motive, in no spirit of

self-reliance or self-pleasing, and with no merely selfish aims. Each may plead to be 'counted worthy' of the opportunity, and may cry with the preacher who struggled so long with the anguish of a fell disease— 2 Thess. i. 11, 12.

'Dismiss me not Thy service, Lord,
But train me for Thy will;
For even I in fields so broad
Some duties may fulfil;
And I will ask for no reward,
Except to serve Thee still.'[1]

—For a Consistent Life.

Such being the true servant's duty, St Paul also desires for his converts—(2) *a life that may glorify their Master*, that men, seeing their lives, may be led to think more highly of their Lord; and they may be deemed happy in having such a Master, and He in having such servants. Here is a relationship which in a way puts all on an equality. The poor man may live this life as fully as the rich, the humblest Christian as truly as the wisest and the most powerful. Each in his place may thus be honoured of God, and in turn bring honour to God.

The Servant thus glorifies the Master.

No doubt it is hard for us to realise the depth of divine condescension which is thus revealed. That we should in any way be allowed to bring glory to the Eternal One is amazing. And yet the duty and privilege presented to us by St

[1] T. T. Lynch, *The Rivulet.*

2 Thess. i. 11, 12.

Paul are quite obvious. Men must judge a faith by the type of character generally produced by it. If it be morally impotent, if it do not raise men above the control of their passions and the dictates of self-interest—if, in fine, it leave them no better than the general conditions of life around them, then it can win for itself little or no respect. Men will not honour it, because they cannot honour its professors. Still less will they be drawn towards its God. The honour of our God is thus, among men, in the hands of His people. His name suffers with their failure, and conversely He is glorified in proportion as their lives win the sincere respect of men.

Variety in Character and Service.

Here let us note a fact in life of which account must be taken. All men do not honour alike the same type of Christian character. One man's highest ideal of the Christian life is that of the active, bustling, radiant, enterprising worker. Another reveres the quiet, reflecting, reserved, gentle, retiring man of faith. One finds a saint in an ecclesiastical warrior; another in a silent recluse. Let us not be too sure of our own judgment. The Lord Jesus found work and honour for men as various in character as St Paul, St Peter and St John. Martha and Mary were both approved. Strongly contrasted characters may each glorify God.

Our duty is, however, recognised; it is familiar; we accept it as a matter of course. But do we bring down the general to the particular? Do we summon ourselves into court? Do we each ask, 'What am *I* doing to bring honour to my God?' The Thessalonians were able so to live. Do we fall short of their attainments? Must we needs repeat the cry of Christina Rossetti?

2 Thess. i. 11, 12. The Personal Duty.

'Lord Jesus, who would think that I am Thine?
Ah! who would think,
Who sees me ready to turn back or sink,
That Thou art mine?'

Does one say, 'It is difficult'? Yes; no doubt it is difficult. But St Paul did not fail to meet this thought. All that he hopes his converts may be and do is 'according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.' They had, and we have, 'no power of ourselves to help ourselves,' but 'our sufficiency is of God.' He Himself is the source of the power by which man can please Him.

Possible in the Lord.

Here was a fact which marked off the Christian God from the pagan divinities. He was a God Who could hear and answer; not a deity dumb before the agonised appeals of worshippers (*cf.* 1 Kings xviii. 26-38). The consciousness of this leads St Paul to use a phrase which suggests the

2 Thess. i. 11, 12.

proud happiness of this conviction. The peace is the grace of 'our God,' a phrase St Paul only uses here in 1 Thess. ii. 2, and iii. 9, and in 1 Cor. vi. 11. He is all that the Christian needs. Is any strong? Let him be sure that he is 'strong in the Lord, and in the power of His might.' Is any weak? Let him be assured that 'my God shall supply all your need.'

Suggestions for Prayer.

Let us cry with the Psalmist:

'Let my heart be sound in Thy statutes, that I be not ashamed' (Ps. cxix. 80).

'How precious also are Thy thoughts unto me, O God! how great is the sum of them!' (Ps. cxxxix. 17).

'I will praise the Lord with my whole heart, in the assembly of the upright, and in the congregation' (Ps. cxi. 1).

'That it may please Thee to bless and keep all Thy people;

'*We beseech Thee to hear us, good Lord.*'

XIII

A MOST SOLEMN CAUTION

2 Thess. ii. 1-3.

Now we beseech you, brethren, by the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, and by our gathering together unto Him, that ye be not soon shaken in mind, or be troubled, neither by spirit, nor by word, nor by letter as from us, as that the day of Christ is at hand. Let no man deceive you by any means.

2 Thess. ii. 1-3. A Solemn Topic.

We approach one of the most difficult passages in Holy Scripture. But since our purpose is devotional, since we are reading this letter of St Paul mainly for its lessons to ourselves, we may touch with brevity upon some aspects of the controversy which has so long raged around this chapter.

—And a Subtle Temptation.

Perhaps we may be the more ready to do this because of one temptation which waits on the student of Holy Scripture. For when we come upon such problems as that presently to be discussed—Who is the Man of Sin?—it is more easy to espouse a cause, to take up and defend an interpretation, to resent any other view, than it is to ask ourselves, What is the lesson of this passage *for myself?* Surely it is one of the

2 Thess. ii. 1-3.

saddest features of the study and consideration of Apocalyptic Scripture that the triumph of a school of interpretation seems sometimes to obscure the aim of personal edification and warning.

—The Zeal for the External.

It may be that the danger is more general than this. It is only a part of one persistent peril. There is always the possibility of being zealous for the externals of religion, and neglecting its spirit; of being zealous for an ecclesiastical organisation, and forgetting the purpose for which it exists; of being zealous for one side of the truth, and yet of evading its message to ourselves; of being zealous for a doctrine, and yet never really receiving the grace for which it stands.

A man may be a profound theological scholar, a distinguished ecclesiastic, a popular preacher, a successful organiser, or a diligent labourer in the humbler fields of Christian service, and yet may not really know the Master to Whom he is pledged. Our unceasing need is to watch the zeal for the externals, lest it crush down spiritual life, or conceal a lack of the one thing needful.

St Paul's Plea.

Let us note, then, in approaching this subject, that St Paul's concern is for the essential well-being of his converts. He is thinking of their hope of salvation through Christ Jesus; he is

jealous lest any false statement should weaken their hold upon Him. 2 Thess. ii. 1-3.

His deep concern is manifest in (1) the *manner of his plea.* —Its Manner. His tone is that of confidential, affectionate solicitude. His word which, both in our A.V. and R.V. is rendered 'beseech' (ἐρωτάω), is only used by St Paul four times, three of which are in the letters to the Thessalonians (Phil. iv. 3; 1 Thess. iv. 1, v. 12; 2 Thess. ii. 1). In its New Testament usage it suggests no authority on the part of the person asking over the person asked. It is the word which the Evangelists use of our Lord when He asks anything of the Father; it is not the word proper to one asking a favour of a superior (αἰτέω); nor is it the word so freely rendered 'beseech' (παρακλέω), which suggests summoning help to one's side. So then St Paul asks, and does not use the language of authority or of supplication.

There are times when spiritual teachers do well to use the tone and terms of authority. Perhaps it would be well if they more often spoke with firmness upon questions of sin. But there are also times when it is not wise to parade authority. Many hearts and consciences respond more readily to a simple plea, made by man to man, than to a command. The 'we beseech you' of St Paul might

2 Thess. ii. 1-3.

often displace, with much advantage, the tone and terms that have about them a dictatorial ring.

—Its Subject.

With St Paul, in this passage, the plea gains all the strength it needs from (2) the nature of its *subject*—'We beseech you,' not 'by,' but 'touching the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, and our gathering together unto Him' (R.V.). The subject is so solemn that no other stress is needed. It is that 'coming' of which he had spoken so definitely in his former letter (1 Thess. ii. 19; iv. 15-17; v. 2); and the 'gathering together' described in 1 Thess. iv. 17, though the word (ἐπισυναγωγὴ) is only used here and in Heb. x. 25, where it implies the assembling of Christian people for worship. That is the great theme of which the Apostle has something to say that may correct difficulty raised within the Church at Thessalonica.

—Its Purpose.

The (3) *purpose* of his plea in this matter is a simple one—that they will not be disturbed in mind, or positively led astray, by unauthorised teaching on this subject. His purpose in asking is in order that they may stand firm. They are not to be 'soon'—swiftly, with the volatility of the frivolous and shallow—shaken from their mind, shaken out of their wits, disturbed, as the surface of the sea is by the wind.

They were to resist any disposition to this,

whether some member claimed to speak under the influence of the Holy Spirit, or by word of mouth in ordinary speech, or even if there were produced some letter which claimed to come from the Apostle himself, affirming that the Day of the Lord was already upon them. He solemnly cautions them to let no man beguile them by these or by any other means. 2 Thess. ii. 1-3.

The warning of the Apostle has been needed many times since the day he wrote it. Men have presumed to fix dates for the Day of the Lord; expectations have been raised; whole cities have been filled with excitement; and on more than one occasion thousands have awaited in agony the arrival of the assigned hour. What harm has been wrought by the falsification of these predictions, what sin followed the reaction from acute dread, it is impossible to say. It must suffice for us to assure ourselves that the subject is not one for mathematical demonstration. Our duty in respect of it is to be always ready, not because we shall, but because we shall not, know the day and the hour when the Son of Man cometh. It shall be 'in such an hour as ye think not' (Matt. xxiv. 44); and the uncertainty is not a denial of comfort, but rather a disposition of mercy. The Warning not obsolete.

Suggestions for Prayer.

2 Thess. ii. 1-3.

Let us pray (1) for grace to remember and wisely to act on the recommendation 'prove all things' (1 Thess. v. 21).

But meanwhile (2) that we may be ever 'looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ' (Titus ii. 13).

And (3) that we may take to ourselves the exhortation, 'seeing that ye look for such things, be diligent that ye may be found of Him in peace, without spot, and blameless' (2 Pet. iii. 14).

'O Lord, Who never failest to help and govern them whom Thou dost bring up in Thy steadfast fear and love; Keep us, we beseech Thee, under the protection of Thy good providence, and make us to have a perpetual fear and love of Thy holy Name; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.'

XIV

THE COMING OF ANTICHRIST AND THE COMING OF CHRIST

2 Thess. ii. 3-12.

Let no man deceive you by any means: for that day shall not come, except there come a falling away first, and that man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition; who opposeth and exalteth himself above all that is called God, or that is worshipped; so that he as God sitteth in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God. Remember ye not, that, when I was yet with you, I told you these things? And now ye know what withholdeth that he might be revealed in his time. For the mystery of iniquity doth already work: only He who now letteth will let, until he be taken out of the way. And then shall that Wicked be revealed, whom the Lord shall consume with the spirit of His mouth, and shall destroy with the brightness of His coming: even him, whose coming is after the working of Satan with all power and signs and lying wonders, and with all deceivableness of unrighteousness in them that perish; because they received not the love of the truth, that they might be saved. And for this cause God shall send them strong delusion, that they should believe a lie: that they all might be damned who believed not the truth, but had pleasure in unrighteousness.

Without entering upon the perplexing mass of rival interpretations offered in regard to this passage, let us note a few landmarks for our guidance in devotional study of the passage. 2 Thess. ii. 3-12.

2 Thess. ii. 3-12.

Antichrist—a familiar subject

Any Bible-reader will perhaps ask himself how far the Jew of St Paul's day was familiar with the subject of Antichrist. The answer may be gathered from the Book of Daniel (chaps. ii., vii., viii., ix., and xi.). If Josephus (*Antiq.* x. 11, § 7), writing not so many years after St Paul's letters to the Thessalonians, speaks of persons watching in his own day the gradual fulfilment of Daniel's prophecies, we may reasonably infer that when Josephus was a boy, and St Paul was writing those letters at Corinth, interest in the prophecies of Daniel was real and widespread. It is contended, indeed, that the Jews had 'a fully-developed legend of Antichrist — perhaps oral, but more probably written — which was accepted and amplified by Christians' (Bousset, *Der Antichrist,* quoted by M. R. James in Hastings' *Dictionary of the Bible,* vol. iii.).

—In the Jewish Church

When, therefore, our Lord spoke of the end, it was to hearers already familiar with the subject. The disciples' question in Luke xxi. 7 is more than the expression of a newly-aroused interest; it is the result of long-cherished curiosity. They would not be surprised when He warned them of 'false Christs,' 'false prophets,' or of the 'abomination of desolation' (Matt. xxiv. 23, 24; Mark xiii. 6, 14; Luke xxi. 8). It was not a new theme, but a very old theme; and so the

dark saying in John v. 43, 'If another shall come in his own name, him ye will receive,' may at once have been taken (as it was by some of the Fathers) as a reference to Antichrist. 2 Thess. ii. 3-12.

Thus, with a basis of prophecy, and with the language of our Lord, it is not surprising that the idea of Antichrist should be familiar to the Christians of apostolic times. St Paul (ver. 5) had talked with the Thessalonians on 'these things.' St John speaks of the subject as one very familiar: 'Ye have heard that Antichrist shall come' (1 John ii. 18; and compare 2 John 7). —And to Christians.

With these considerations in mind, we may now draw out certain clear intimations from the passage before us:

The revelation of the Man of Sin, the son of perdition, is to be preceded by not 'a' but 'the' apostasy. The Course of Events.

There is 'a mystery of iniquity,' which is already working; but there is power which restrains or holds it back.

This withholding agency will be removed, 'taken out of the way.'

The Man of Sin will then be fully revealed with all his powers; to be followed, however, by the revelation of a greater One with greater power.

Broadly speaking, there have been two ways of looking at this narrative. (1) One regards the Two Main Interpretations.

2 Thess. ii. 3-12.

prophecy as already fulfilled; the events are over long ago. In this view, Antichrist was some one of the false Messiahs; the withholding power was the Roman authority, which, in St Paul's case, was some protection against his Jewish adversaries; the coming was the destruction of Jerusalem and the foundation of the Christian Church.

(2) The second interpretation regards the prophecy as unfulfilled, and the events as either in the present or the future. The mystery of ungodliness is a general disobedience to God's laws; the restraining power is that of organised human society; the Antichrist is someone who shall arise within the Christian Church, claiming divine prerogatives; the coming is the end of the world.

The two views are not mutually exclusive; one may be deemed the foreshadowing, the warning, of the other.

The Early Church and the Lord's Coming.

Before passing to consider some details, let us mark one fact—the extreme concern of the early Church as to the coming of the Lord. Manifestly it was a subject foremost in men's thoughts. We do well to make much of their example—quietly, soberly, and with many prayers to be led aright.

This duty is the more clearly laid upon us because our Lord has made it so plain that the

'signs of His coming' may readily be overlooked by the careless. Definitely as they have been described, the worldly will find it easy to ignore them. The 'children of the day' must not be found unprepared. 'Ye, brethren, are not in darkness, that that day should overtake you as a thief' (1 Thess. v. 4). There is a serious and sober interest in the subject, a serious and sober study of the subject, which is far removed from presumption. To that we should give ourselves.

2 Thess. ii. 3-12.

Suggestions for Prayer.

So, then, let us pray, remembering St Paul's petition for Timothy—'The Lord give thee understanding in all things' (2 Tim. ii. 7); and knowing that 'in the last days perilous times shall come' (2 Tim. iii. 1).

'O Lord Jesu Christ, Who at Thy first coming didst send Thy messenger to prepare Thy way before Thee; Grant that the ministers and stewards of Thy mysteries may likewise so prepare and make ready Thy way, by turning the hearts of the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, that at Thy second coming to judge the world we may be found an acceptable people in Thy sight, who livest and reignest with the Father and the Holy Spirit, ever one God, world without end. Amen.'

XV

THE APOSTASY

2 THESS. ii. 3.

THAT day shall not come, except there come a falling away first.

2 Thess. ii. 3.

The Apostasy, what is it?

WHAT is this apostasy, upon the identification of which so much must depend? The word in its ordinary, apart from its theological meaning, implies revolt from or rebellion against a ruler or a leader. In the Greek version of the Old Testament, the Septuagint, apostasy is used of revolt from or rebellion against God. Thus Jeremiah announces to Hananiah his approaching death—'because thou hast taught rebellion against the Lord' (Jer. xxviii. 16; *cf.* Jer. xxix. 32). The Greek word is therefore used with a certain recognised association.

Associations of the Word.

Apostasy in Jewish History.

But, apart from the use of this Greek word, the *idea* of rebellion against God was familiar to every Hebrew. It is the common theme of the prophets. In early days the Israelites were warned—'only rebel not ye against the Lord' (Num. xiv. 9); and how melancholy in the face of such warning is the after-picture presented in

Isa. i. The children of Israel time and again proved themselves before God to be 'a rebellious nation that hath rebelled against Me' (Ezek. ii. 3). The summary given in 2 Chron. xxxvi. 15, 16, embodies the nation's history in its relation to God. The idea, then, of apostasy, as well as the word which described it, was familiar to every Jew amongst St Paul's converts. It must also have been familiar to the Gentile members of the Church. There could, with them, be no thought of separating the claim of the Lord Jesus from the religious history of the Jewish people. The Hebrew Scriptures would to them be as precious as they are to us. The 'falling away' of the chosen people would be no unfamiliar fact.

2 Thess. ii. 3.

Keeping all this in mind, in what meaning shall we infer St Paul to have used the word apostasy?

Clearly it is *not a person.* Some of the Fathers identified the apostasy with the Antichrist; he himself was the falling away, the revolt against God which the Apostle had in mind. Others supposed the apostasy to be the fruit of Antichrist's appearance and work; he was not himself the apostasy, but was the originator and prime worker in it. But these interpretations seem to do violence to the plain sense of the

Apostasy not a Person.

2 Thess. ii. 3.

passage. The apostasy precedes the coming of Antichrist, and implies a certain condition of things of which the appearance of that evil one is the culminating point.

—But the Conduct of Persons.

The apostasy, then, is not a person, but the *attitude or settled conduct* of persons, decisive, widespread, perhaps insolent in its open challenge of the truth of God. We shall remember (1) that our Lord forewarned His people of such a development (Matt. xxiv. 10-12); and (2) that the Apostles detected signs of such a tendency even within the early Church. Witness the solemn words of St Paul in 1 Cor. xvi. 22; the warning to Timothy (1 Tim. iv. 1); and that of St Peter (2 Pet. ii. 1).

Such an apostasy appears the more terrible the more closely it is examined.

—Within the Christian Church.

(1) It is *within the Christian Church.* There can be no rebellion where there has been no allegiance, no revolt where there has been no authority. The falling away is a falling away from grace, and from fidelity to God. It is the revolt, therefore, of those who have been openly allied to the Church of Christ, who have shared its fellowship, joined in its work, and assisted to advocate its claims. It may, doubtless will, include some who, in their day, preached Christ, as well as some who were their hearers. There

will be unfaithful shepherds, as well as wandering sheep. 2 Thess. ii. 3.

(2) It will be *a revolt against purity in faith and in morals.* First the faith may decay, and then the morals, or first the morals and then the faith; or the corruption may proceed simultaneously with both. In any case it is to culminate in the dethroning of God. Such a decay of religion and such a corruption of public life have been observed in various nations at various times. We shall do well to remark that they come on gradually, so that the progress may long escape the attention of those who are themselves its victims. A Revolt against Faith and Morals.

There is, I think, in some quarters a disposition always to think of such a revolt as remote—a sorrow that may fall upon other people in other times, but not upon ourselves. But two facts should be taken note of. —Not necessarily remote.

(1) There is already in our midst much organised resistance to the Christian faith—a resistance which denies its facts, denounces its principles, and derides its claims. From the platform and the press come the deliberate denunciation of God, denial of the divinity of Jesus Christ, and repudiation of His claims upon us. It is, I say, deliberate; it is organised; it is aggressive; it seeks to influence the child as well as the adult. Present Facts: Open Hostility.

2 Thess. ii. 3.

Sometimes its true character is thinly veiled by an acknowledgement of a moral value in the teaching of Jesus Christ. By way of contrast the sacred person of Our Lord is often most grossly assailed.

Private Hatred.

Moreover, in addition to this public and organised resistance there is much private hostility. In the course of other duties it has from time to time been my lot to read letters, written by persons of education and of social position, who have considered themselves aggrieved by the receipt of a widely scattered appeal to help Christian work. The deliberation, the grossness, the frantic hostility of the blasphemy contained in some of these letters is almost past belief. Whether the writers have themselves fallen away, or whether they were reared in an atmosphere of infidelity, is uncertain ; but in any case they point to the existence of a danger for which the Christian man is not always prepared.

The Social Duty of Believers.

We do well, then, to assume nothing as to the possible remoteness of a great apostasy. In the face of known facts, all Christian people, now and everywhere, have a *social duty*. In every age men have been not unready to observe the symptoms of such decline in others ; to mark defection from the faith, and to question the propriety of lines of conduct. And, indeed, we

owe it as a duty one to another, thus to be watchful and thus to warn. It may be done in no pharisaical, no censorious, no carping spirit, but in true love and honest candour. At the last, many may say to their brethren, 'Why did you not tell me I was going astray?' The accused will not dare to reply, 'Am I my brother's keeper?' 2 Thess. ii. 3.

—And their Personal Duty.

But if there be a social duty in this respect, much more is there *a personal duty*. It is for each to hear the Master's voice speaking of this betrayal. It is for each to ask in sincerity, 'Lord, it is I?' No regard for the welfare of others can excuse neglect of our own souls. Self-inquiry—systematic, sincere and prayerful—is a serious duty. Happy the soul which, after scrutiny before God, can always say, 'Lord, Thou knowest all things; Thou knowest that I love Thee' (John xxi. 17).

Suggestions for Prayer.

Shall we pray to God with the Psalmist? 'Let my heart be sound in Thy statutes, that I be not ashamed' (Ps. cxix. 80). And 'They draw nigh that follow after mischief; they are far from Thy law,' but 'Thou art near, O Lord' (Ps. cxix. 150, 151).

2 Thess. ii. 3.

'Lord, we beseech Thee, grant Thy people grace to withstand the temptations of the world, the flesh, and the devil, and with pure hearts and minds to follow Thee the only God; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.'

XVI

ANTICHRIST

2 Thess. ii. 3.

That man of sin . . . the son of perdition.

The corruption of the Church moves on to meet the corruption of the world. The first issues in the apostasy; the second in the enthronement of Antichrist. There is to be an evil union between the Church and the world. 2 Thess. ii. 3.

(1) In Antichrist we clearly perceive *a person.* It is one who has a 'coming,' who can be spoken of as a 'man,' and a 'lawless one,' who will oppose God and the worship of God, substituting the worship of himself. The Personal Antichrist.

(2) The manifestation of this person is deferred by an agency which is at first spoken of as a thing (τὸ κατέχον, ver. 6), and then as a person (ὁ κατέχων, ver. 7), the restraint upon the progress of lawlessness appearing as a general principle or influence which has a personal representative. The Restraining Power.

(3) The manifestation of the Man of Sin, when it comes, is according to the 'working' (ἐνέργεια) of Satan. The 'working' is a word elsewhere The Working of Satan.

2 Thess. ii. 3.

(Eph. i. 19; iii. 7; iv. 16; Phil. iii. 21; Col. i. 29; ii. 12) used of God; the Apostle designedly speaking of the manifestation, the mystery, the coming, and the miracles of Antichrist, in terms which are elsewhere associated with Christ Himself. The result of this 'working' is seen in deceit, natural to unrighteousness, which has for its victims the perishing souls deluded.

The Temporary Triumph.

(4) The success of Antichrist is but temporary. For a time he prospers; he has his subjects; he exercises power. Doubtless some will think his rule permanent, his power unassailable. Nevertheless, the end is sure. There is a day of reckoning for him, 'whom the Lord Jesus shall slay with the breath of His mouth, and bring to nought by the manifestation of His coming' (R.V.). The manifestation of the Lord, the coming of the Lord, will bring to nought the one whose manifestation and coming had been attended with some temporary success, to the endless loss of his victims.

Identifications.

Such, very briefly, are the facts about Antichrist. With whom is he to be identified? Here history warns us. Almost every period in the past of the Church has had its own theories as to the identity of the Man of Sin. The variety of these identifications cautions us against presumptions. In the early Church men thought

that the power of Imperial Rome was that which 2 Thess. ii. 3.
'let' or hindered the coming of Antichrist, and that its overthrow would lead to a reign of lawlessness only to be cut short by the coming of the Lord. In the Middle Ages the Eastern Church, struggling against the forces of Islam, was readily disposed to find the Man of Sin in Mohammed; whilst the Church of the West, awakening to the corruption of the Roman Church, and more especially struck by the worst scandals of the Papacy, found Antichrist installed at Rome. A variant of this conviction was advanced by Luther, who saw Antichrist in the Papal system, and not in an individual Pope. The circumstances of the French Revolution not unnaturally led many to see Antichrist in Napoleon I.; whilst some in our own day, recalling the amazing tendency of the Roman Church to demand from its followers belief in new doctrines, look for Antichrist in some future occupant of the Papal throne.

From all these theories of the past and the present we shall do well to turn, in order to reflect upon our own duty.

One Fact Clear.

Antichrist is coming; and certain things are demanded of the faithful. We need watchfulness to discern the signs of the times; not presumptuously seeking to fathom the purposes of

2 Thess. ii. 3.

God down to the last detail, but with a sober alertness seeking to understand the course of events. We need courage, that we may not be drawn into movements which insensibly lead us away from God, into concessions which disestablish the truth and dethrone our Lord. We need patience, not to grow weary of the waiting or the conflict, not to jump at conclusions, or to form judgments the overthrow of which may try our faith.

—And a Greater Fact.

But if Antichrist is coming, *Christ* also *is coming.* It is with Him that the ultimate victory lies. His people must never, in the hour of trial, forget that the matter is their Lord's. The conflict is between Christ and Antichrist, and the issue of that conflict is sure, even though for a time prosperity attend 'that Wicked,' 'whom' ultimately 'the Lord shall consume.'

The Call to Watchfulness.

Meanwhile, the solemn warning against so great a day of sin bids us redouble watchfulness over ourselves. When we fall into sin, a little Antichrist appears in our own lives. It may be that sharp measures will be needed to make us know our true state. For such we well might ask, like the poet of another day, Ben Jonson—

'Hear me, O God!
A broken heart
Is my best part:

Use still Thy rod,
That I may prove
Therein Thy love. 2 Thess. ii. 3.

If Thou hadst not
Been stern to me,
But left me free,
I had forgot
Myself and Thee.

For sin's so sweet,
As minds ill-bent
Rarely repent,
Until they meet
Their punishment.'

Suggestions for Prayer.

Let us ask that we may—

(1) 'Remember' (ver. 5) our warnings;

(2) Stand fast in the face of evil—its 'power,' 'signs,' and 'lying wonders' (ver. 9);

(3) Find 'comfort' from 'our Lord Jesus Christ Himself' (vers. 16, 17).

'O Lord, we beseech Thee to keep Thy Church and household continually in Thy true religion; that they who do lean only upon the hope of Thy heavenly grace may evermore be defended by Thy mighty power; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.'

XVII

CHOSEN TO SALVATION

2 Thess. ii. 13, 14.

But we are bound to give thanks alway to God for you, brethren beloved of the Lord, because God hath from the beginning chosen you to salvation through sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the truth: whereunto He called you by our Gospel, to the obtaining of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.

2 Thess. ii. 13, 14.
The Faithful Encouraged.

The blending of encouragement with warning is one of the most striking characteristics of St Paul's Epistles, and he is led by the Spirit to write with a due regard for all his readers. He does not forget the disorderly in thinking of the faithful; he does not forget the faithful in thinking of the disorderly. Pastoral admonitions are not always conveyed with the same wisdom and care. It sometimes falls out that the faithful receive the admonitions intended for the faithless; the congregation in church hearing much upon the evil of neglecting public worship, and those who give to God's work meekly receiving the condemnation of those who give not at all. The offenders are outside, and unaffected even

by the most stirring eloquence which they do not hear. 2 Thess. ii. 13, 14.

St Paul's method differs. He has been writing of the time of the apostasy, of the day of Antichrist, and of the day of the Lord. His solemn warnings concerned all the Church; but from the intimation of the doom awaiting those who 'believed not the truth, but had pleasure in unrighteousness' (ii. 12), he passes to confirm the faith and encourage the hearts of the elect of God. He returns again to the note of thanksgiving on their account, and then sets out the grounds of that thanksgiving.

As Beloved of the Lord.

At once St Paul leads their thoughts to the relation of believers to their Master. They are 'brethren beloved by the Lord' (R.V.), loved not merely now, but in the past also (*cf.* Col. iii. 12 and 1 Thess. i. 4). The love of God is associated with His eternal purpose towards His people. Is this not a fact we sometimes overlook? The love of God often seems very real and very wonderful, when joined with the recognition of some present boon, or some fresh perception of the crowning mercy of redemption. We are often—are we not?—like some children, who are ready enough at intervals to feel and to understand the love of a father or a mother, and yet easily forget the permanence of that love—

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2 Thess. ii. 13, 14.

the love of parents when the child was too young to understand, the love that was faithful though unrecognised, the love that survived rebellion and wound, the love that would not be killed. And we, who are not children, do we not often treat the love of God thus—remembering it with the present, and as shown in great events for us, but often forgetting that the love has always been there?

And yet, if we did but know it, there is hardly one thought more wonderful in its power of consolation than this, that the Lord, our Master, loved and loves us, even when we have not been thinking of Him, even when we have been unfaithful to Him, even when we are suffering under His discipline. The believer, then, is assured of this, that he is '*beloved of the Lord.*'

—And the Chosen of the Lord.

The beloved of the Lord are the *chosen of the Lord.* The Jews at Thessalonica had been accustomed to regard themselves as belonging to a peculiar people, 'a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation' (Ex. xix. 5, 6). But, under the new dispensation, the election to blessing and privilege is not for the few alone. St Peter (1 Peter ii. 9) tells the Church at large, the Christian Church, the Church Gentile as well as Jew, that it is 'a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a peculiar people.' St Paul almost invariably

addresses the Churches as elect, or called, or holy. The Thessalonians are reminded in both letters of this position (here, and in 1 Thess. i. 4, v. 9). 2 Thess. ii. 13, 14.

The chosen of the Lord are '*chosen to salvation.*' This is so 'from the beginning,' in the eternal purpose of God (*cf.* Eph. i. 4 and 2 Tim. i. 9); but in its manifestation starts from the time when the Gospel came to them 'not . . . in word only, but also in power' (1 Thess. i. 5); for then it was that He called them 'by our Gospel.' —As Chosen to Salvation.

The conditions of their salvation are twofold. There is to be 'sanctification of spirit' or, as some prefer it, sanctification by the Holy Spirit. There is also to be 'belief of the truth.' The union of sanctification and faith in the truth is worth noting, as one of St Paul's many reminders that clearness of belief and firmness in holding the truth are matters of vital consequence to the believer. The idea of a Christian man who scarcely knew what he believed or why he believed, was as impossible to St Paul as that of a Christian to whom purity of mind and uprightness of conduct were of no concern. Men, indeed, dispute as to what is truth; but there is no more reason why people should on this account regard vagueness as a suitable mark of religious belief, than there is that they should accept looseness of —Under Two Conditions.

2 Thess. ii. 13, 14.

conduct as a proper characteristic of Christian morals.

With Glory before them.

The saved of the Lord are called 'to the obtaining of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.' When the Son of Man reaches the consummation of His glory, His chosen will find themselves sharers in it. This is 'the prize of their high calling' (Phil. iii. 14), this the reward of those who, in this life, have had much to bear, who, by 'patience' and faith in all 'their' persecutions and tribulations (i. 4), have been an example to others.

What more can we ask or desire? The thought of that tremendous event, the Day of the Lord, cannot but drive us to self-examination and to godly sorrow. But with it comes the remembrance of God's wonderful purpose for His people. Through His mercy in Christ Jesus the day can bring no catastrophe for the 'beloved of the Lord.'

Suggestions for Prayer.

Remembering the gracious promises suggested by St Paul, let us pray—

(1) For a better understanding of the great work of redemption, and the purposes of God as to ourselves (see Eph. i. 3-14).

(2) For a deeper realisation of the love of the

Father, and 'the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge' (Eph. iii. 19). 2 Thess. ii. 13, 14.

(3) For grace to live nearer to God, and 'walk as children of light' (Eph. v. 8).

'Grant, we beseech Thee, Almighty God, that like as we do believe Thy only-begotten Son our Lord Jesus Christ to have ascended into the heavens; so we may also in heart and mind thither ascend, and with Him continually dwell, Who liveth and reigneth with Thee and the Holy Ghost, one God, world without end. Amen.'

XVIII

'STAND FAST'

2 Thess. ii. 15.

Therefore, brethren, stand fast.

2 Thess. ii. 15.

Some Causes of Doubt: Physical.

Much of the difficulty which some Christian people have in holding the faith comes from an insufficient regard for the facts of their faith. They think that they are troubled about the foundation facts of their creed, when, as often as not, they are hardly thinking about these facts, still less examining seriously into them. Sometimes their anxiety has a purely physical origin. They are out of health, and perhaps it is no great matter; but it is enough to damp their spirits, to put them out of sorts, to induce a general sense of discontent. The sufferers in such a case might very well say with Mrs Browning—

> 'Methinks we do as fretful children do,
> Leaning their faces on the window-pane,
> To sigh the glass dim with their own breath's stain,
> And shut the sky and landscape from their view.'

In such a mood their spiritual being suffers in sympathy with their physical being. They harbour

a crowd of doubts which the return of health will suffice to expel once more. 2 Thess. ii. 15.

But sometimes the trouble is really that of the mind, and not of the body. It may be that it comes from lending a ready ear to the often carelessly-made suggestion of doubt by others, or even to the allegation of open unbelief. There is a general sense of uneasiness and apprehension, though it may be unconfessed to others. Possibly the doubt, once brought to birth, has been fed upon publications which either openly attack Christianity or else tend to weaken its hold. Literature of this character, bearing widely-known names, can be seen upon the bookstalls or be found amongst the general contents of the bookseller's shop. In many cases it is offered at a low price. Its purchase occasions no comment, and so it is found in the hands of many who, taking it up first out of curiosity, come very speedily to feel its influence. —Intellectual.

Doubt, so originating, is sadly common. Yet, strangely enough, it often seems that the victim of such discomfort has not thought of a rather obvious duty; has not tried the doubts and criticism by the test of Holy Scripture; has not thought of such evidence as his own religious experience would provide; has not opened his heart to any trusted friend who might have given help. Doubt Unchallenged.

2 Thess. ii. 15.

St Paul's Advice: 'Stand Fast.'

To all such St Paul may here have some advice. He has been dealing with greater themes—the Day of the Lord, and the circumstances that shall precede it, the sorrows of those deluded by Antichrist, the salvation and ultimate reward of those who are found in Christ. With these facts in mind, he proceeds—'Therefore' ('So then,' R.V.) 'stand fast.'

St Paul's 'therefore,' 'so then,' 'accordingly then,' is a phrase which he often uses. The reasoning of the Epistle to the Romans affords occasion for its employment eight times (Rom. v. 18; vii. 3, 25; viii. 12; ix. 16, 18; xiv. 12, 19). The phrase also appears in Gal. iii. 29 and vi. 10; Eph. ii. 19; 1 Thess. v. 6; and here. Where St Paul uses the phrase, he is always drawing a logical inference which has a practical bearing. He brings his correspondents face to face with facts, and asks them to reflect upon the just inference to be drawn from them.

Back to the Lord's Words.

'So then, stand fast.' Timorous soul, alarmed by the corruption of faith or the decay of morals, by the voices that accuse Christian doctrines and the vices that defy Christian morals, by the doubts that others raise and the weakness of your own convictions, go back to the Lord's own warnings. Think on the harder tests to which

others have answered; remember the need, under the trials promised to His Church, of endurance 'unto the end'; look at the promised security of such as God has chosen to salvation, and the happiness of such as are to share in the glory of Christ. The promises of God are sure. 'So then, stand fast.' 2 Thess. ii. 15.

Ruskin, discussing the way in which the Apostles taught morals, notices the way in which all instruction centres round the person of our Lord. 'They knew that the believer who had Christ had all. Did he need fortitude?—Christ was his rock; Equity?—Christ was his righteousness; Holiness?—Christ was his sanctification; Liberty?—Christ was his redemption; Temperance?—Christ was his ruler; Wisdom?—Christ was his light; Truthfulness?—Christ was the truth; Charity?—Christ was love.'[1] In dealing with the disorder associated with the coming of Antichrist, and in pointing to the one source of the believer's security, the emphasis is on the same Divine Helper. The faithful are called 'to the obtaining of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.' 'Therefore . . . stand fast.'

Four Ways of Standing Fast.

St Paul's use of the verb is illuminating. The Corinthians are exhorted to 'stand fast *in the faith*' (1 Cor. xvi. 13); the Galatians to 'stand

[1] *Stones of Venice*, II. viii., § xlv.

2 Thess. ii. 15.

fast *in the liberty'* wherewith Christ has made them free (Gal. v. 1). St Paul hopes to hear of the Philippians that they 'stand fast *in one spirit'* (Phil. i. 27), and exhorts them to 'stand fast *in the Lord'* (Phil. iv. 1). To the Thessalonians he had previously sent the message that he really lived if *they* stood fast '*in the Lord'* (1 Thess. iii. 8).

A Modern Need: Resolution.

Do we need the same exhortation? Surely it often seems that what the Christian Church and what the individual members of it very specially need is resolution. We are not firm enough. We make concessions; we yield something of our position; we admit anxiety as to what may have to go next. Why? Because, for the time being, we forget the very truths which have been our strength and stay in the past. Go back to them, or rather to the Lord with Whom they are concerned. The weakness is, however, significant. There is something wrong. We must, in a very simple sense, get 'back to Christ,' discarding whatever for the time being has usurped His place.

'With all thy heart, with all thy soul and mind,
Thou must Him love, and His behests embrace;
All other loves, with which the world doth blind
Weak fancies, and stir up affections base,
Thou must renounce and utterly displace,

And give thyself unto Him full and free,
That full and freely gave Himself for thee.'[1] 2 Thess. ii. 15.

The heart that casts away its doubt, and so comes, will not find the Lord fail of His promises.

Suggestions for Prayer.

So in prayer let us:

(1) Ask for clearer faith, not only for our own comfort, but also that we may 'in meekness' instruct 'those that oppose themselves' (2 Tim. ii. 25).

(2) Knowing that we have 'need of patience' (Heb. x. 36), and that 'He that shall come will come, and will not tarry' (Heb. x. 37).

'Almighty God, Who seest that we have no power of ourselves to help ourselves; Keep us both outwardly in our bodies, and inwardly in our souls; that we may be defended from all adversities which may happen to the body, and from all evil thoughts which may assault and hurt the soul; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.'

[1] Edmund Spenser, *An Hymn of Heavenly Love.*

XIX

TRUE TO OUR TRUST

2 Thess. ii. 15.

Hold the traditions which ye have been taught, whether by word, or our epistle.

2 Thess. ii. 15. Truth Unchanging.

There are those who look at the truth about God and our Lord as something of uncertain substance and form, changing from age to age. There may be in their mind some confusion between the truth, and man's way of looking at or receiving the truth. The truth is fixed and unalterable. The truth as to the divinity of our Lord must be now what it was in the days of St Paul. The fact expressed by St Paul's statement that 'God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them' (2 Cor. v. 19), must be in the twentieth century what it was in the first. But men's attainment or perception of truth and ways of stating truth differ. And so ages of doubt and controversy have combined to present to many minds such an appearance of general uncertainty, of conflicting and often sharply-contrasted

opinions, that they hold few things strongly, and nothing with a joyful certainty. 2 Thess. ii. 15.

St Paul looked at the faith in another way. With him the Christian belief embodied certain clearly-defined truths, which it was the duty of the faithful heart and mind to receive as a sacred trust, and to treasure as of inestimable value. To Timothy he writes: 'That good thing which was committed unto thee keep by the Holy Ghost which dwelleth in us' (2 Tim. i. 14; *cf.* 1 Tim. vi. 20 and 2 Tim. i. 12). The form of the Christian faith as held by St Paul in his last years and passed on to Timothy, is called a 'deposit' (*παραθήκη*), something placed in the custody of one who is bound to return it undiminished and uninjured. St Paul's View. The Faith a Trust or Deposit.

The faith, then, is a sacred trust; it is our business to guard it as a precious treasure; and, if we hand it on, then to transmit in full, unimpaired by our custody of it.

Again, the statement of the faith, as by St Paul, is represented by him as 'the form of sound words, which thou hast heard of me' (2 Tim. i. 13). The 'form' is *ὑποτύπωσις* (like *παραθήκη*, a word only used in the New Testament by St Paul, and by him only in the Epistles to Timothy). The 'form' here is the 'pattern' of 1 Tim. i. 16. Here is suggested the original

2 Thess. ii. 15.

typical character of the statement delivered in a summary of the faith—whether to be regarded as written or as orally delivered, or as delivered in both ways, is immaterial. The 'deposit,' the sacred trust, is something capable of expression in a definite statement.

—A Trust to be Handed On.

Now the letters to Timothy were written long after the letters to the Thessalonians. It is the more interesting, therefore, to remark that in the earlier as in the later Epistles St Paul lays emphasis upon the trust-like character of the faith taught, and the duty of guarding it.

Here the teaching of the Apostle is called 'traditions.' The word tradition, a rendering of παράδοσις, sounds almost like a challenge. It is the word employed by St Matthew and St Mark in speaking of the 'traditions of the elders' (Matt. xv. 2; Mark vii. 5; and elsewhere). St Paul is fully aware of all that the word implied to the Jewish mind (*cf.* Gal. i. 14 and Col. ii. 8), and must have used the word designedly. Other men had gone beyond the Word of God; but he has something to hand on which is of greater value. The new traditions are very different from the old, just as 'our Gospel' (ver. 14) is very different from the 'traditions of the elders.' The Gospel so delivered was the message of salvation through Jesus Christ, the only-begotten

of the Father, the crucified, the risen, and ascended Lord. Whether delivered by word of mouth or by letter was of no importance; in either case the message was, in its origin, of God. 2 Thess. ii. 15.

The duty St Paul suggests to us is plain. We have the faith; it is committed to us as a trust. It is ours to guard—not in the spirit of formalists, making more of the words than of their import, but in the spirit of those who find therein the message of the Lord to man, the words that are 'life' (John vi. 63). We are to guard them because they are so precious; because we have found them so ourselves; because whithersoever they go they carry the message of life; because they are truths to live by; because they convey the assurances in the confidence of which we may die in peace and joy. Our Duty to the Faith.

'Hold fast' is not, indeed, a popular watch-word. In some minds it seems almost to have become an unworthy thought. There springs up in many ages a certain spurious liberality, which, in its haste to conciliate, is always in a condition of surrender. Nothing can be less like the attitude of the men who lived nearest to the times of our Lord. Let us be content to associate ourselves with them, and be followers of men like St Paul as they were of Christ (1 Cor. xi. 1).

Suggestions for Prayer.

2 Thess. ii. 15.

Shall we pray thus? That we may have—

(1) The feeling of the Psalmist, 'O how love I Thy law!' (Ps. cxix. 97).

(2) The resolution of the Psalmist, 'I will keep the commandments of my God' (Ps. cxix. 115).

(3) The firm conviction of the Psalmist, 'Concerning Thy testimonies, I have known of old that Thou hast founded them for ever' (Ps. cxix. 152).

'God, Who didst teach the hearts of Thy faithful people, by the sending to them the light of Thy Holy Spirit; Grant us by the same Spirit to have a right judgment in all things, and evermore to rejoice in His holy comfort; through the merits of Christ Jesus our Saviour, Who liveth and reigneth with Thee, in the unity of the same Spirit, one God, world without end. Amen.'

XX

THE ONE RESORT

2 Thess. ii. 16, 17.

Now our Lord Jesus Christ Himself, and God, even our Father, which hath loved us, and hath given us everlasting consolation and good hope through grace, comfort your hearts, and stablish you in every good word and work.

2 Thess. ii. 16, 17.

Soul-Trouble.

There are many ways of dealing with anxiety of soul, with the ordinary trials of life—whether physical or mental—with all that we call 'troubles.' People will try to still the voice of conscience, to forget its accusation, amidst pressure of work or a round of pleasures. People will try to find strength under suffering in the cold philosophy that they are no worse off than many others. And this they will do whilst the one true source of consolation and strength remains open. How amazing the ingratitude, how supreme the folly, which tries every resort but the right one, and insists on suffering when 'comfort' and strength await every sincere applicant!

Weakness Realised.

It is well for us to realise our weakness; to learn that we are not self-sufficient. In our

2 Thess. ii. 16, 17.

humility we may cry, with a seventeenth-century poet—

'Lord, what am I? A worm, dust, vapour, nothing!
What is my life? A dream, a daily dying!
What is my flesh? My soul's uneasy clothing!
What is my time? A minute ever flying:
My time, my flesh, my life and I;
What are we, Lord, but vanity?'[1]

True; but the right issue of such confession is a remembrance of the strength laid up for us in God.

And Strength Provided.

Yes, there is 'comfort' to be had from 'our Lord Jesus Christ Himself, and God, even our Father.' We need not trouble our minds with doubts why the Lord is thus separated from God. Reading the words quite simply, they suggest no such anxiety. God was manifest in the flesh. In the Lord Jesus Christ God was seen; through the life of the Lord were the gracious invitations of the Gospel given; by the acts of the Lord were the mercies of the Almighty made plain. 'The Father sent the Son' to be our Saviour (1 John iv. 14, and *cf.* iv. 9) and 'to be the propitiation for our sins' (1 John iv. 10). How naturally the mind turns first to the Lord, Who is thus revealed in so intimate an association with our eternal welfare! But we do not stop with the thought

[1] Joseph Hall, *The Shaking of the Olive Tree* (1660).

of the Redeemer's work. There is the Father's love; He 'is love,' and from that love comes the work of redemption so simply and comprehensively stated in John iii. 16. 2 Thess. ii. 16, 17.

Our 'comfort' in the face of spiritual distress and mental disquiet is derived from a source which is truly *paternal*, in grace as well as in Nature; from One Whose 'tender mercies are over all His works' (Ps. cxlv. 9), Whose concern for us is, if we will but see it, more intimate, more comprehensive, than the love of any earthly parent can be; Who is indeed 'the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort' (2 Cor. i. 3); Who, in fine, 'hath loved us.' From a Source Paternal.

It is a source *omniscient*; the Father knows all our needs better than we know them ourselves. It is a source *omnipotent*; the Father is able in all things to deal with us as He sees best. It is a source *omnipresent*; the Father is as near to the child in a remote island of the seas, in an African village, in a settler's 'shack' in the Far West, in a great city of India or China, as to the parent in London or Chicago. —Omniscient, Omnipotent, Omnipresent.

But our comfort is also derived from a source which is *redemptive*—and that whether we think of the Father or of the Son. If we think of the Father, then it is from Him Who 'sent His Son' to be Our Saviour. The comfort from the —Redemptive.

2 Thess. ii. 16, 17.

Lord Jesus is from One Who knows man's estate, Who knows man's temptations; it is from One Who has given the best and greatest pledge of love in dying for man; it is from One Who 'ever liveth to make intercession for us.'

The Comfort is Eternal and Inexhaustible.

The promised comfort is, moreover, eternal. It is inexhaustible in the present, not transitory, as it might be if derived from a human source; and it carries with it a 'good hope' for the future. Our apprehension of God's goodness may be uneven; we may see it more clearly and trust it more fully one day, and less the next. But the goodness, the patience, the love which can help us are there unchanged.

And all is by Grace.

And all is by grace. The spontaneous favour of the Almighty comes to our help. By many ways it carries to us the strength we need. The

—Through Varied Channels.

channels are varied, in God's wisdom—so varied that often men take the comfort as derived from some earthly source alone, when they should be looking beyond the agent or instrument to the true source. We owe much to the consolations, the comfort, the strengthening of wise and tender friendships. We owe much to converse with other minds through books. We owe much to the comfort drawn from sincere meditation upon the works of God, as we have observed them. We owe still more to the strength and help

derived from learning His mind as revealed in Holy Scripture. But we do well to seek comfort also in still more direct communion with Him; in the pouring out of confessions and our wants in prayer, in submitting ourselves definitely and consciously to His will, in patiently waiting His answer. 'Seek, and ye shall find'—comfort. 2 Thess. ii. 16, 17.

Suggestions for Prayer.

Let us pray, then, for the ever-present help of 'the Comforter' (John xvi. 7), that the Spirit may help our infirmities, and make us 'strong in the Lord, and in the power of His might,' whatever be our need.

'O God, the strength of all them that put their trust in Thee, mercifully accept our prayers; and because through the weakness of our mortal nature we can do no good thing without Thee, grant us the help of Thy grace, that in keeping of Thy commandments we may please Thee, both in will and deed; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.'

XXI

STRENGTH FOR SERVICE

2 THESS. ii. 16, 17.

Now our Lord Jesus Christ Himself, and God, even our Father . . . stablish you in every good word and work.

2 Thess. ii. 16, 17. The Source of Strength for Service.

As God is the source of the heart's true consolation and encouragement in the face of trial, so also God is the source of the believer's strength for service. Thus St Paul, mindful of the outer as well as the inner life of his converts, invokes the help of God for all their active life. To the Father and the Son he looks for the power to establish them 'in every good word and work' (R.V. 'work and word').

A General Need—Stability.

He is still dealing with the circumstances suggested by the coming of Antichrist, and also, no doubt, with the defects of certain brethren at Thessalonica, to whom he presently refers. Remembering this conduct, he feels that the need of all who would be faithful is stability. The word here translated 'stablish' is that used by St Luke when he says that our Lord 'set His face to go to Jerusalem' (Luke ix. 51), and when he reports our Lord's words to Simon

Peter, 'When thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren' (Luke xxii. 32). So also we have it employed of 'strengthening' the disciples (Acts xviii. 23; *cf.* 1 Thess. iii. 2); and of stablishing their hearts (1 Thess. iii. 13; James v. 8). The R.V. also reads here 'stablish them,' *i.e.* 'your hearts.' The need of the faithful is that they be firmly fixed in the habits of a consistent, witness-bearing life. 2 Thess. ii. 16, 17.

The members of the young Church are therefore to look to God for stability in the life of witness and of service. If we accept the decision of the Revisers as to the order of 'word' and 'work,' we shall take the 'work' first. In so doing we can readily find for ourselves a reminder that with the normal Christian, the man or woman in ordinary health, and amidst ordinary circumstances, the *work* must be a more serious matter than the *word*. Between them they fully demonstrate character; but the world is shrewd enough to judge rather by actions than by professions. The Epistle of St James is a sufficient reminder that, even in Apostolic days, the 'word' sometimes had precedence of the 'work'; but in every Church in every age the same difficulty has presented itself. It is, and always will be, so much easier to talk Christianity than to practise it; to recite a creed than to live it out. Word and Work. —Their Relation.

2 Thess. ii. 16, 17.

The Fear of Inconsistency.

It is as well to remember that the difficulty here presented occasionally acts, in the case of some sensitive minds, as a deterrent from open service. They shrink from speaking the 'word,' lest some should say their 'work' was at variance with it. They know the danger, and they cannot bear the thought of bringing dishonour to the faith they profess by any inconsistency of life. They, of all amongst us, need to observe very particularly the Apostle's prayer; to see how he points us to God as the source of consistency; to recognise that 'work' and 'word' can only be brought into and kept in due relation by the guidance and comfort of the Holy Spirit.

'Good Works.'

But what shall we understand by 'every good work'? Surely the words are meant to be quite inclusive. Every 'good' work is opposed to every evil work, the actions which are consistent with a life of sanctification contrasted with the actions of such as have 'pleasure in unrighteousness' (ver. 12). Thus the Apostle does not speak only of 'works' in the sense of the good deeds

An Inclusive Term.

of philanthropy or religion. Every right action is included; all the deeds which go to make up life; all that belong to the common duties of life, as well as the deeds that lie beyond them.

Later on in this letter the Apostle has to condemn certain members of the Church who

had ceased to labour for their living. They had given up certain 'good' works, and are condemned accordingly. Possibly these thought that, in following the course of action which leads St Paul to call them 'busybodies' (iii. 11), they were doing 'good works' of a higher order than the 'good works' of the normal life. St Paul sets them right. First in good works must ever stand the duties of our life and station. A man who hurried over his office duties, and 'scamped' the work for which he was paid, in order to help in an evangelistic meeting; a daughter who left a sick parent untended whilst she went to a missionary working-party; a father who neglected his own children whilst zealous for the needs of waifs; a mother who was concerned for the sorrows of oppressed nationalities whilst her own home was disorganized and forlorn—all these would have something to learn as to the primary nature of 'good works.' 'Let them learn first to show piety at home' (1 Tim. v. 4), is an admonition that may apply to a wider circle than that of the 'children or nephews' of a widow. The faithful discharge of primary duty is a necessary precedent for devotion to other 'good works.'

2 Thess. ii. 16, 17.

The Right Order: First Calls.

But if 'good works' begin at home, in the office, in the workshop, they should not end there.

Wider Opportunities.

2 Thess. ii. 16, 17.

Few persons are so placed that every avenue for wider service is closed to them. In works of philanthropy, that is, in actions prompted by our love towards our fellow-men, there are countless opportunities. Some of them are especially required of us, as part of our duty towards our fellows in the Church of Christ. The care of the 'poor saints' was early a matter of concern to the Church (*cf.* Rom. xv. 26); and the 'especially unto them who are of the household of faith' must still be remembered as a direction in the business of doing 'good unto all men' (Gal. vi. 10). The idea of Christian brotherhood is very imperfectly realised where the poorer members of a Church are not the objects of care and sympathy from their brethren.

—Beyond the Church.

But our duty does not end with the case of the believer. In the mission field no work has been found a more powerful witness for Christianity than the labours of the mission doctor and the mission nurse. Christianity should not be less zealous to manifest its works at home. To-day the drift of public feeling is all towards securing the rights of the poor, towards readjusting by law the relations of capital and labour, towards defending the weak against oppression. That is well. But even so we shall never make the Good Samaritan obsolete. There will always

be room and need for works of mercy done for the love of God. Such 'good works' Christians of all people should be 'careful to maintain' (Titus iii. 8). 2 Thess. ii. 16, 17.

Let us, however, be careful to note the true place of such works in the Christian life. They do not procure our salvation. We do not by them 'acquire merit,' to use the phrase of Mr Kipling's character. Our salvation is 'not of works, lest any man should boast' (Eph. ii. 9). We are saved and called, 'not according to our works, but according to [God's] own purpose and grace' (2 Tim. i. 9; and *cf.* Titus iii. 5). Pleasing and acceptable as they are to God, when they spring out of a true and lively faith, they are not the tribute by which we purchase pardon. Good Works do not save us.

But the Apostle also invokes for his converts stability in 'every good word.' Doubtless he had in mind the perversion of doctrine, such as was shown in the false views as to the Coming of the Lord; it may be also the false message, claiming to come from him (ii. 2), which was occasioning trouble at Thessalonica. Over against them he would set the true message, the 'Word of the Lord' (iii. 1); possibly also his own directions by this Epistle (iii. 14); and very much more. For we may believe him to have thought of the words his converts would use; of the message Good Words.

2 Thess. ii. 16, 17.

they would convey; even perhaps of their ordinary speech in daily intercourse.

'Every good work and word'—it includes all our life that is right before God, as seen with the eyes of His mercy. Truly it is from Him alone that we can look for the guidance, the restraint, the inspiration that shall make us faithful in work and word.

Suggestions for Prayer.

Let us pray—

(1) For the continuance of the work of God in us (Phil. i. 6); (2) for abundant fruitfulness in good work (Phil. i. 11); (3) for deliverance from the snare of idle words (Matt. xii. 36); (4) for zeal in receiving and guarding the Saviour's own message to us (John vi. 63).

'That it may please Thee to give to all Thy people increase of grace to hear meekly Thy Word, and to receive it with pure affection, and to bring forth the fruits of the Spirit;

'*We beseeech Thee to hear us, good Lord.*'

XXII

AN APPEAL WITH A PURPOSE

2 Thess. iii. 1.

Finally, brethren, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may have free course, and be glorified, even as it is with you.

2 Thess. iii. 1. A Plea for Prayer.

The main theme of St Paul's letter is now laid aside. He turns from some of the most moving subjects of Christian thought to deal with minor questions of interest to the young Church. He writes as their father in God, their trusted adviser, and one who, in the Church, may claim to speak with some authority. Being all this to them, he nevertheless says—'Pray for us.'

St Paul had made the same request in the valedictory words of his former letter (1 Thess. v. 25); he makes a similar plea in Rom. xv. 30; Eph. vi. 18, 19; Col. iv. 3, 4. There was an office which the youngest convert could exercise to the advantage of an Apostle; he could pray for him. St Paul was a man of very unusual spiritual experience. One who had that vision on the road to Damascus (Acts ix. 4), one who

2 Thess. iii. 1.

could write of himself as caught up to the third heaven (2 Cor. xii. 2-4), had been brought very near to God. And this is the man whose letters are full, not only of prayer for others, but also of pleas that converts, including such young and inexperienced persons as were members of the Churches, would pray for him.

Intercessary Prayer.

With many saints of God the practice of intercessary prayer has been one of peculiar interest and happiness. They have wrestled in prayer for the advantage not only of those whom they loved, but also of those who had set themselves forward as adversaries. Over and over again it is found in private life that such prayer has been answered in the saving of souls, as well as in the meeting of necessities that belong to our outer life. No one must say that another is beyond our prayers—whether an Apostle, because of his nearness to God, or a notorious offender, because of his rebellion against God. No one must say that such prayer is, from God's point of view, superfluous, because He knows our heart. Rather let us hold, with Ruskin, that 'the whole confidence and glory of prayer is in its appeal to a Father Who knows our necessities before we ask, Who knows our thoughts before they rise in our hearts.'[1] We know that our Father sees the

[1] *On the Old Road*, ii. § 286.

yearning before it finds expression in words; but we also know that He would have us speak. 2 Thess. iii. 1.

That the weak should be able by prayer to help the strong, the disciple the Apostle, the learner the master, the hearer the preacher, need not surprise us. We are, in this matter, in a new kingdom. Who knows just how souls stand in the sight of God? But surely the power to help in this way is too little recognised or employed. Yet there are faithful souls that know it and use it, and are happy in this service. Are we in their company? The Weak Helping the Strong.

In this instance St Paul supplies a definite object for the intercession he desires. The willing helper is to pray 'that the Word of the Lord may run, and be glorified' (R.V.). So then the Apostle was not thinking of himself, but of his work; rather, the thought of self is swallowed up in the thought of the high office committed to him. He is like the ancient prophets of his people. He is charged with a message from God. His one thought is that the Word of God, which a poet of earlier days had said 'runneth very swiftly' (Ps. cxlvii. 15), should spread by his agency. Whithersoever it went, it would accomplish God's purpose; he could desire nothing better. The Object Sought.—The Free Progress of the Word.

No minister of the Gospel of our Lord could

2 Thess. iii. 1.

A Noble Yearning.

have a nobler yearning than this. It is a greater thing than looking for advancement or public praise; it is a better thing than hoping for the prosperity of a particular parish or congregation or school of thought; it is a great, simple, catholic yearning—the desire that the Word of God may spread and prevail. How poor and mean some of our personal ambitions and some of our organised endeavours look in the presence of this desire!

But it is a yearning not to be looked for only in those lawfully called and sent within the Church of Christ to exercise its ministry. It is the proper yearning of every regenerate heart. It is a summons to each, bidding it see that it does its best to clear the way for the Word.

Obstacles in the Way.

There are obstacles enough in its path. There is the natural depravity of man's heart. There is the low standard of life sanctioned by public opinion. There is the constant pre-occupation in the interests of work and play. There are the ever-recurrent doubts of minds that would fain thrust a finger into the nail-prints in our Lord's hands before they will consent to believe. There are the antagonisms and rivalries of Christian Churches. There are the inconsistent lives of many 'who profess and call themselves Christians'—and many other things besides. These all obstruct the path

of the Word. The simplest, humblest believer can by prayer help in the necessary, the unceasing work of helping to remove them (*cf.* Ephes. vi. 19, 20). 2 Thess. iii. 1.

St Paul recognises all this, and is eager to admit it. The Apostle's mind moves at once from the general to the particular; with a natural courtesy he joins with this plea a reminder of the happiness enjoyed by himself and his Thessalonian correspondents; by himself as their minister of the Word, and by them as receiving to their salvation. A Personal Appeal.

In this courteous thought there is for us a hint which ought not to be overlooked. The desire for the spread of the Gospel can only be real where the Gospel has already been known as the power of God unto salvation. There is a test for every community. Would they help home missions and foreign missions? Then what is the measure of their desire? That the Word 'may have free course, and be glorified,' *even as it is amongst themselves?* How far *is* it glorified amongst them?

Suggestions for Prayer.

Let us then remember the apostolic injunction, 'Pray one for another' (James v. 16), and pray particularly for such as are in the ministry of the Word; but also for all, that by conduct as well as

2 Thess. iii. 1.

by speech, they may help and not hinder the progress of the Kingdom of God.

'O Lord, we beseech Thee mercifully to hear us; and grant that we, to whom Thou hast given an hearty desire to pray, may by Thy mighty aid be defended and comforted in all dangers and adversities; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.'

XXIII

DEFENCE AGAINST ADVERSARIES

2 Thess. iii. 1-3.

Pray . . . that we may be delivered from unreasonable and wicked men; for all men have not faith. But the Lord is faithful, Who shall stablish you, and keep you from evil.

2 Thess. iii. 1-3. Adversaries of the Gospel.

Every missionary work has its own enemies. They were with St Paul all through his life. They may have represented the alarm of opposing faiths, as in the case of the Jews at Thessalonica itself (Acts xvii. 5), and in the case of Demetrius and the craftsmen at Ephesus (Acts xix. 24). They may have been personal opponents, as in the case of Alexander the coppersmith (2 Tim. iv. 14). In every such case they were the enemies not merely of the man, Paul, or of the growing Christian Church, but also of God. Through St Paul they struck at the Lord Whom he served and Whom he proclaimed.

That is why St Paul uses as to them the language of condemnation. They are 'unreasonable,' perverse (ἀτόπων) men. The word originally meant 'strange,' 'marvellous,' and is

2 Thess. iii. 1-3.

by St Paul used here only. We may note, however, that, according to St Luke, the malefactor upon the cross witnessed that our Lord had done 'nothing amiss' (*οὐδὲν ἄτοπον*). They are also 'wicked' (*πονηρῶν*) men, described by the same word as the 'wicked one' of Matt. xiii. 19, the 'wicked servant' of Matt. xviii. 32, and the 'wicked person,' of 1 Cor. v. 13. Manifestly they were, in the eye of St Paul, persons who in character were hostile to God; whose actions were comparable to those of the Evil One, who was in perpetual hostility to St Paul's Master. Doubtless he had especially in mind those whose attitude towards the Gospel was one of open and deliberate antagonism.

Modern Antagonism to the Gospel: Open Foes.

It will not escape us that to-day—as with men in every period of the Church's history—we have to deal with just such antagonists. Their hostility is open and deliberate. They turn away some from the truth. They intimidate some weak inquirers. They confirm in doubt some who would waver.

The Antagonism of Indifference.

But perhaps these are not the most serious enemies of faith. With many their hostility, often bitter in its tone and manifestly anxious to wound, creates a feeling of sorrow and shame rather than of alarm or doubt. They may do less harm than those who, without denying

Christ, still render Him no true service. For these create an atmosphere in which indifference to God and to the service of God springs and grows apace. 'Unreasonable and wicked men' may often escape public notice, and produce no alarm in Christian minds, whilst the influence of their characters and lives is wholly hostile to faith. We need, then, to watch, not only against the open and confessed adversary, but also against the secret foe, the unsuspected source of danger. 2 Thess. iii. 1-3.

Now comes a contrast. The root cause of all this hostility is plain; it is the absence of faith. The soul's enemies are faithless. But need we despair? Nay; for 'the Lord is faithful.' Greater, then, is He that is with us than they that are against; the Lord is on our side, we need not fear man. The Enemy Faithless: God Faithful.

It is one mark of the open enemy that he seeks to sow in our hearts distrust of God. So the enemy worked even in Eden. But God is faithful, even when we are tempted (1 Cor. x. 13), and when we seek pardon for confessed sins (1 John i. 9). He called us, and the call was in the nature of a pledge (1 Cor. i. 9; 1 Thess. v. 24). We on our part may fail; but God will stand sure. The faithful *know* it; for they have proved it. We can trust God.

'Experience bows a sweet, contented face,
Still setting to her seal that God is true.'

2 Thess. iii. 1-3. —Who will Stablish us.

And our God, being faithful, will do two things for His people. 'The Lord . . . shall stablish you' (see on ii. 17); and the perversities of 'unreasonable and wicked men' cannot avail against the power of God exerted on His children's behalf. 'The Lord . . . shall keep you from evil'—an inclusive promise. He shall protect His saints from the Evil One, from the evil-doer who is the instrument of the adversary, and from the evil deed of those who oppose themselves. The Lord's Prayer has made us familiar with the difficulty of determining whether the 'evil' is a person or thing; but, reading here in a simply devotional spirit, we may be content to take the promise in its widest sense. St Paul's aim clearly is to assure his friends of the all-sufficient protection of God in the face of evil forces.

—And Keep us from Evil.

God's Care of His People.

The promise is, however, to be read with understanding. Within the experience of St Paul, within the experience of very ordinary Christian people, God has been pleased to work for them very special deliverances from the designs of adversaries. But God is not always seen to move in this way. St Paul himself was not always so delivered; nor is the release of others to be looked for as a certainty. The promise is far-reaching. The believer, stablished by God, may be kept from evil, not by unvarying delivery

from trial, but by being empowered to suffer with patience, with faith undimmed, with the unswerving conviction that there is laid up for him the 'crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, shall give . . . unto all them . . . that love His appearing' (2 Tim. iv. 8). 2 Thess. iii. 1-3.

Suggestions for Prayer.

Let us pray that—

(1) If the Lord will, He may save us from the evil men (Ps. lxiv. 1-6); (2) that in trouble, however caused, we may have a sure sense of the support of God: 'hide not Thy face from Thy servant' (Ps. lxix. 17); (3) that in the face of every peril we may clearly see our one source of refuge: 'God is the strength of my heart, and my portion for ever' (Ps. lxxiii. 26).

'We beseech Thee, Almighty God, look upon the hearty desires of Thy humble servants, and stretch forth the right hand of Thy Majesty, to be our defence against all our enemies; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.'

XXIV

WELL-FOUNDED CONFIDENCE

2 Thess. iii. 4, 5.

And we have confidence in the Lord touching you, that ye both do and will do the things which we command you. And the Lord direct your hearts into the love of God, and into the patient waiting for Christ.

2 Thess. iii. 4, 5.

There can be no manner of doubt as to the mercy of God towards His people. His part will certainly be done; if not in the way expected or desired by our limited sight and imperfect knowledge, yet in the best way. From this conviction it is easy for St Paul to pass on to the expression of a further conviction. He would have the Thessalonians realise their strength in God, and so he adds a note of personal encouragement.

The Apostle's Confidence.

Once more he puts on record his confidence about them: not in them, for that would suggest reliance upon self, but 'in the Lord' as to them. Writing to the Galatians he expresses a like confidence in a rather different form—'I have confidence in you through the Lord' (Gal. v. 10).

Well-founded Confidence

2 Thess. iii. 4, 5.

There is no room to trust in man as man, or man unaided; the trust must be in the Lord Who alone can make strong. But the confidence expressed carried commendation with it. There is implied a belief in the faith and steadfastness of the believers at Thessalonica. It is the belief of one who has known them, has seen many of them face to face, has been aware of—to some extent a witness of—their sufferings, and is rejoiced to hear of their godly endurance.

—And Commendation.

Encouragement from such a source is very sweet to the struggling soul. Confidence often begets resolution. Men will do their best to rise to the level of that which is expected of them. It is possible that we do not always allow such confidence the expression it might well have. There is a fear of appearing to trust in man; there is a fear of going beyond that which is true; there is a fear of arousing the self-confidence which so easily springs to the surface in many hearts; there is a fear of encouraging a disposition to assume that all is well, where there may be little ground for any such conviction. Then there is the belief — the just belief — that the Christian man needs to be kept very humble; that it is better for him to dwell on his own shortcomings than on his own attainments.

The Value of such Stimulus.

Why sometimes withheld.

2 Thess. iii. 4, 5.

The True Qualification for Confidence.

All that is well. But remember, the confidence suggested is 'in the Lord,' in His work, manifested for His glory in the character and life of His servants. That being so, might not the word of encouragement be more often given? It is especially valuable to the young; whose experience of spiritual conflict is as yet short. But it is hardly less valuable in the right season to those of longer service, particularly to those shrinking and distrustful souls, the bruised reeds and the smoking flax of faith and endeavour. St Paul, at all events, as we have seen already, knew when to encourage his people. Here the encouragement is linked to the recollection of past teaching and the importance of the directions now being given. He is sure that the Thessalonians are doing their best in living up to the standard set before them, whether it be in receiving definite views of the truth or definite directions as to personal and social conduct.

Why is such Confidence Lacking?

Happy is the teacher who can with confidence say so much! There is a warning here for every minister of the Word. Is it impossible to say so much? Then whose fault is it? Is there any failure in the ministry—any lack of wisdom, or energy, or devotion which stands in the way of efficiency? There is a warning here for the hearer. Is such confidence impossible? Then

is it because the ear hears, but the conscience is unmoved? Is it because there is no endeavour to grow in grace, nothing but a slothful contentment with a formal belief and a conventionally correct life? Let the joyful confidence of the Apostle in these early believers set us upon the work of self-examination. 2 Thess. iii. 4, 5.

The Service of Help Indicated.

Let such a work be done. What then? The Apostle dwells still upon the source of our hope. Are any smitten to the earth by the sense of their own unworthiness and shortcomings? Are any able to lift up their hearts to God in humble gratitude for all that they find He has done for them? In either case let them still look only to Him. Their desire must be that their gracious Lord will continue His work, keeping both the penitent soul and the rejoicing soul in the right path. He is to direct them, to keep them pointing straight for the love of God and the 'patience of Christ' (R. V.).

The Lord Our Guide.

It is Christ Himself, it is the Good Shepherd, Who is to do this; the Lord Who knew the human heart, the circumstances of the human life, and sorrows even greater than those the Thessalonians had to bear. He is a guide, director, leader, with love for us; with knowledge of our needs; with experience, as man, of our temptations, though He himself remained sinless.

2Thess. iii. 4, 5.

Here is infallible wisdom as well as boundless compassion enlisted on our behalf.

—Into Love and Patience.

The Guide shall keep His people straight for the love of God and the patience of Christ—always seeking to have a true love for God; always desiring to reach the patience Christ showed. God's love for us, Christ's suffering for us (wondrous manifestation of that love!)—these are the two precious truths in the presence of which the stranger and pilgrim will seek ever to live. They will desire more and more to love God in return, more and more to learn something of the patient endurance which the Master showed. Love and patience — they are well joined thus, and in many other ways; but especially in this, that the heart which realises God's love for it, and in return truly loves God, is the heart that makes the most willing learner with Christ in the school of suffering.

Suggestions for Prayer.

Let us ask —

(1) For guidance, when we may encourage ourselves and one another; and how we may most wisely do it, speaking the word 'in due season' (Prov. xv. 23).

(2) For a deeper sense of reliance upon Our Lord as 'The Good Shepherd' (John x. 11).

Well-founded Confidence

'Almighty and Everlasting God, Who, of Thy tender love towards mankind, hast sent Thy Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ, to take upon Him our flesh, and to suffer death upon the cross, that all mankind should follow the example of His great humility; mercifully grant, that we may both follow the example of His patience, and also be made partakers of His resurrection; through the same Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.'

2 Thess. iii. 4, 5.

XXV

SALUTARY DISCIPLINE

2 Thess. iii. 6-12.

Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye withdraw yourselves from every brother that walketh disorderly, and not after the tradition which he received of us. For yourselves know how ye ought to follow us: for we behaved not ourselves disorderly among you; neither did we eat any man's bread for nought; but wrought with labour and travail night and day, that we might not be chargeable to any of you: not because we have not power, but to make ourselves an ensample unto you to follow us. For even when we were with you, this we commanded you, that if any would not work, neither should he eat. For we hear that there are some which walk among you disorderly, working not at all, but are busybodies. Now them that are such we command and exhort by our Lord Jesus Christ, that with quietness they work, and eat their own bread.

2 Thess. iii. 6-12.

A Painful Duty.

Confidence will put its trust to a test. St Paul is sure that the Thessalonians 'will do the things which' he tells them (ver. 4); and now he proceeds to lay a command upon them. The young Church must bring itself to exercise discipline over certain of its own members.

Its Course: Wrong-doing.

There had been wrong-doing. The evil is sufficiently pronounced to call for the intervention of the Apostle, and for him to stamp

the wrong as calling for severe treatment. St Paul's condemnation was, no doubt, drawn from him by idleness of a peculiar type. Probably he had not to deal with the idler of the kind familiar to us all, the despair of the economist and the plague of the philanthropist; but with the idler who found in his faith a pretext for neglecting personal duty. The teaching of the Apostle in regard to the coming of the Lord had thrown such persons off their balance. Acting, no doubt, on natures which had no love of industry, the teaching produced a conviction that the ordinary duties of life were superseded. 'Why work,' they may have said, 'when the Lord may come to-morrow?' The example of St Paul himself, who 'wrought with labour and travail night and day, that we might not be chargeable to any of you' (iii. 8), was ignored. The offenders got out of hand, they walked disorderly (iii. 6), and it was necessary to give them a sharp lesson. From that the Apostle, despite his love for the young Church, did not shrink.

2 Thess. iii. 6-12. The Offenders: Busybodies.

There must be discipline. From 1 Thess. iv. 11, 12, it is clear that the Apostle had sought before to restrain; now he bids the Church to leave the idlers to themselves. If they despise work, others must not support them. In the circumstances of such a community as that of Thessalonica the

The Remedy: Discipline.

2 Thess. iii. 6-12.

punishment was sufficiently drastic. If their co-religionists would not support these idlers, it was improbable that anyone else would do so. If members of the Church withdrew themselves from the company of such offenders, they would find themselves very much alone.

The Aim: Restoration.

But the command thus solemnly given (*cf.* 1 Cor. v. 4, 5) is to be justified not only by the nature of the offence, but by the remedial nature of the punishment enjoined. The injunction, given 'in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ,' that the Church should leave the offenders to themselves, is accompanied by an equally solemn appeal to the offenders themselves, again 'by our Lord Jesus Christ,' to 'work, and eat their own bread.' Even whilst condemning the disorderly, St Paul looks on to their repentance and re-instatement. His heart still yearns over them. Himself an enthusiast, and once an enthusiast for a wrong cause, he can understand how others go astray. Himself intensely conscious of looking for the Lord's coming as an event of the deepest personal importance, he can understand how others misapply its immediate message for themselves. And so he will not shut the door upon them, he will not write of them as utterly and hopelessly reprobate and outcast; but even whilst condemning, and whilst defining the

nature of their punishment, he invites, nay, commands them, by every thought of their common Lord, to quit their folly and resume the life of simple duty once more. 2 Thess. iii. 6-12.

It is pitiful to remember that St Paul was dealing with members of the Christian Church—with persons who alleged excuse for their conduct in one of the most solemn facts associated with their faith. The circumstances bid us be careful how we interpret the Master's words, and how we read Holy Scripture. We have unceasingly to guard against the temptation to interpret at the will of our own dispositions and desires; to read into Holy Scripture what we wish to find there. He who would take up the Bible for personal use must feel, not occasionally but always, the need of the Holy Spirit's guidance. The Moral.

But however sad it be to mark the fact of the sin and the condemnation, the whole circumstance is not without its value for us. St Paul was very clear as to the need of discipline in the early Church. A high standard of personal character and of social duty was by him set before his converts. He thought it right—and he did not speak of himself—to enter minutely into the duties of men and women in the simplest relations of life. Either gross personal sin, as in St Paul's Example.

2 Thess. iii. 6-12.

the Corinthian case, or sin that sheltered itself (as here) under the cover of religious duty, or sin that (as with St Peter) implied lack of consistency and fear of men, equally met with his condemnation. Perhaps no Christian Church—unless it be in the mission-field—is equally careful as to the discipline of its members. The circumstances of ecclesiastical life to-day may not, indeed, render it easy to employ measures of discipline; but what cannot be done formally may still be done effectively, if the sense of obligation is strong in the minds of individual members. Our tendency to-day is, perhaps, to leave action too much to the conscience of the offender, with the result that gross scandal is sometimes tolerated, to the injury of the Church at large.

The Position To-day.

A Qualification for those who Rebuke Offenders.

It needs great grace wisely to rebuke offenders. No doubt; and let us notice that St Paul's treatment of this case suggests a qualification which can never be overlooked. He challenges them (*cf.* the address of Samuel, 1 Sam. xii. 3) to contrast his own personal conduct with his professions, to see whether he had not practised what he preached. He had not 'behaved . . . disorderly' (ver. 7); he had not lived upon the Church (ver. 8, and *cf.* 1 Thess. ii. 9); he had chosen his manner of life with the aim of helping

others by his example (ver. 9). Here, then, is the first qualification of those who would rebuke others; they must be themselves an example of uprightness. To be less, is to stand in danger of the Lord's condemnation, 'Thou hypocrite, first cast out the beam out of thine own eye; and then shalt thou see clearly to cast out the mote out of thy brother's eye' (Matt. vii. 5).

So, then, this episode throws us back upon the thought of our own position before God. Each of us need not dwell upon the shortcomings of the other person, but rather look at himself. Lord, what am I? That, after all, is the question that most may help us.

Suggestions for Prayer.

Let us pray—

(1) For guidance: 'Teach me, O Lord, the way of Thy statutes' (Ps. cxix. 33);

(2) For safe keeping: 'Order my steps in Thy word: and let not any iniquity have dominion over me' (Ps. cxix. 133).

'Keep, we beseech Thee, O Lord, Thy Church with Thy perpetual mercy: and, because the frailty of man without Thee cannot but fall, keep us ever by Thy help from all things hurtful, and lead us to all things profitable to our salvation; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.'

XXVI

WORK AND WAGE

2 Thess. iii. 10.

For even when we were with you, this we commanded you, that if any would not work, neither should he eat.

2 Thess. iii. 10.

The Nobility of Toil.

In all ages the best minds have recognised the nobility of honest labour. But there is growing up amongst us a view of work which threatens peril to the community. Work is sometimes referred to as though it were an injustice and a burden, a hardship imposed upon the weak by the strong, a penalty to be as far as possible avoided. That is a view of work which is absolutely out of harmony with Bible teaching. It is sometimes claimed that authority is found for it in the sentence passed upon Adam—'In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread' (Gen. iii. 19). But it must not be forgotten that the institution of work is of older origin, for at the making of man it is said that 'the Lord God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it' (Gen. ii. 15). The two facts are often suggested in ordinary

human life. The right work, in right proportion, well done before God, can be to the worker as happy a task as any husbandry in Eden. The evil work, or the work done grudgingly, resentfully, the work unjustly proportioned and unfairly requited, can become nothing better than the struggle with the 'thorns . . . and thistles' of a ground accursed. 2 Thess. iii. 10.

The Jewish mind preserved the primitive ideal, and found work honourable. It saw no dishonour in finding a king amongst the sheepfolds. The Christian mind, accustomed to think of its Lord as once the carpenter, can accept no lower view of work. It knows that work can be dishonoured —by ministering only to greed and self-indulgence; it knows that work may be made oppressive—for it has seen the slave-holder and the sweater. But it will not allow itself because of either to say that work is a mistake or a curse.

—Questioned and Denied.

It is not difficult to see how such a view comes to find favour. The existence of wealth and of a leisured class can never fail to breed discontent. The contrast between Dives and Lazarus, between a man who starves because he cannot get work and a man dwelling at ease without the need of work, is too glaring to escape observation.

There is no place here for discussion of the causes which underlie such contrasts, and of

2 Thess. iii. 10.

the remedies which from time to time are proposed.

The Call to Work.

It must suffice to consider the word as it stands. 'If any man will not work': here seems a call which none can escape. But shall we limit the meaning of 'work'? Must we mean by it only

Work only for Gain.

such toil as men use to get gains? Must 'work' always and only mean the toil that is paid for in cash? Surely not. Are men right in working for gain only long after they have won enough to provide for their needs? If they still toil on, adding house to house and field to field, shall we say they are justified by St Paul? We can hardly do so. Continuance in such work may, in some cases, mean nothing more than slavery to a sordid love of gain or to the excitement of its pursuit. But in other cases the increased wealth may be made a means of enlarged service.

The Administration of Wealth.

Work may have another meaning. The rich man may find in the right stewardship of his wealth ample work, and the very work he ought to do. It cannot be administered aright without care and thought, personal interest and real toil. Such interest and work may make that wealth a help and a blessing to others, and no man will be entitled to call the possessor idle. This sense of obligation exists, and has always existed in many minds. The critic of the rich too often forgets

the men with whom the right use of a large income has been a life-long employment seriously, solemnly carried on as in the sight of God. Such a sense of obligation undoubtedly needs to be more widely felt, and, we may add, more widely honoured. But when it is more widely felt and shown, wealth will be less bitterly attacked. 2 Thess. iii. 10.

Work for the Leisured.

But how much 'work' awaits the man of leisure! He need not read St Paul's words with alarm. He may have discarded all the apparatus of money-winning; but abundant opportunity remains for the exercise of all his powers. There are causes that need his experience, his zeal. There are public duties which he can perform. There are private offices waiting the action of individual workers with the love of God in their hearts. There are wounded spirits as well as broken bodies waiting for His tender care. No man of leisure need stand idle, or feel that in the Church of God he does not earn his bread. If there be nothing more, there certainly remains the true outward service of the Christian faith, the θρησκεία of James i. 27, as Whittier puts it—

'For he whom Jesus loved hath truly spoken;
The higher worship which He designs to bless,
Restores the lost, and binds the spirit broken,
And feeds the widow and the fatherless.'

Suggestions for Prayer.

2 Thess. iii. 10.

Let us ask—

(1) For guidance to know our duty; (2) for grace to use all our opportunities; (3) for the will to consecrate time and means to the service of God.

'Lord, we pray Thee that Thy grace may always prevent and follow us, and make us continually to be given to all good works; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.'

XXVII

A WORD TO THE WISE

2 Thess. iii. 13.

But ye, brethren, be not weary in well doing.

2 Thess. iii. 13.

The Odium of Failure.

When individual members of a Church fail—fail publicly and notoriously—in some simple matter of conduct, they place a new obstacle in the path of their brethren. The outside world will say, 'See what hypocrites these religious people are. They profess this, and they have done that.' The next step is to suggest that those who have not failed are in reality no better than those who did; that they have only escaped censure by the exercise of greater craft. In the face of such accusations men of rectitude may feel their ardour cooled. Or, if their zeal be unaffected, they may shrink as much as possible from publicity, merely to escape the taunts of the worldling.

How the Faithful may escape it.

St Paul may have feared some such effects at Thessalonica. He has been speaking of those whose conduct was a scandal; he has had to recommend strong measures in regard to them.

2 Thess. iii. 13.

But he does not want to cast any slur upon the Thessalonian Church as a whole, and he would fain encourage those who doubtless felt deeply the stain upon the good name of the Church. And he turns to them. 'But ye, brethren, be not weary in well doing'—weary, not in the sense of physical exhaustion from over-work, but weary in the sense of losing heart in the presence of discouragement (*cf.* Gal. vi. 9.)

Discouragements.

These are wise words, and words very needful in every age of the Church. Each period brings with it trials of its own. Each congregation of faithful men finds in its own circumstances trials that may be peculiar to itself. Each individual soul has an experience, which is never exactly the same as the experiences of others. Always—though there be no lack of encouragement and stimulus—there are some things to discourage the faithful. In the hour of trial, in the moment of depression, in the presence of obstacles, let us find comfort in the apostolic summons, 'Be not weary in well-doing.' For the trials are not of themselves enough to excuse slackness. They do not make the mercy of God in Christ less wonderful. They do not lessen our personal need of such a Saviour as He alone is. They cannot nullify the work of God in respect of ourselves, and they cannot lessen by one atom the

And their Limitations.

world's need of the Gospel. They may be painful, harassing, humiliating, saddening; but —if we can only see it—they assuredly have their meaning for us, and they leave us still to deal with God, to give account of our stewardship when the time comes. And so, whatever the trials may be, the wise man will not the less have in mind the injunction, 'Be not weary in well-doing.' Perhaps—is it not often so?—the 'well-doing' may prove to be the way by which God will give an explanation of the trial imposed, or provide relief from it. 2 Thess. iii. 13.

Let us learn the personal, the individual application of this wise counsel. The Personal Call.

'But ye, brethren, be not weary'—whatever others may say or do. We are all more or less sensitive to the influence of example, to the stimulus of fellowship, to the discouragement of witnessing the failure of others. But each soul has to learn its own individuality before God. There is, indeed, the gravest need for us all to keep in mind our responsibility for others. Some one has failed. It is well for each to ask himself, 'Have I helped in that failure? Have I, by thoughtless word or action, by positive failure to help in the hour of need, contributed to the fall of this other?' We cannot too solemnly or too stoutly examine ourselves touching our duty to

2 Thess. iii. 13.

others in the Church of Christ. But, whilst recognising our responsibility as 'members one of another,' we must not forget ourselves. For himself the other one will answer. For myself I also must answer in turn. Failure or success on the part of others, our own duty is still plain; the 'well-doing' is equally required of us.

—To Well-doing as God may Provide the Way.

The 'well-doing' is not a matter we need seek very closely to define. The melancholy failure of which St Paul had been writing was a failure based on a misapplication of a truth and shown in the ordinary affairs of life. We need not narrow the application. God will expect of us no more than the opportunity He provides may offer—but it will not be less. Each of us knows his own place in life, and each can see what 'well-doing' may mean for him.

It is in any case for us to see that the great truth of the Lord's return is rightly understood, and in our lives applied to help right conduct. The common and most familiar duties of life, discharged by the servant waiting for his Lord, gather a beauty of their own from the spirit in which they are done. They are all parts of the joyful service rendered to Him. With George Herbert, in some familiar lines, we can say—

A Word to the Wise

'Teach me, my God and King,
In all things Thee to see,
And what I do in anything,
To do it as for Thee. 2 Thess. iii. 13.

All may of Thee partake:
Nothing can be so mean,
Which with this tincture, For Thy sake,
Will not grow bright and clean.

A servant with this clause
Makes drudgery divine;
Who sweeps a room as for Thy laws,
Makes that and the action fine.

This is the famous stone
That turneth all to gold;
For that which God doth touch and own
Cannot for less be told.'

'Well-doing' is so wide that all may achieve it. By such well-doing the Christian may 'put to silence the ignorance of foolish men' (1 Pet. ii. 15). So 'let us not be weary in well-doing; for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not' (Gal. vi. 9).

Suggestions for Prayer.

Let us pray:—

(1) That each of us may be 'a vessel unto honour, sanctified, and meet for the Master's use, and prepared unto every good work' (2 Tim. ii. 21);

(2) That our lives may thus bear witness for our Lord (1 Pet. ii. 15).

2 Thess. iii. 13. 'Stir up, we beseech Thee, O Lord, the wills of Thy faithful people; that they, plenteously bringing forth the fruit of good works, may of Thee be plenteously rewarded; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.'

XXVIII

NOT AS AN ENEMY

2 Thess. iii. 14, 15.

And if any man obey not our word by this epistle, note that man, and have no company with him, that he may be ashamed. Yet count him not as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother.

2 Thess. iii. 14, 15.

The Wrong-doer as an Enemy.

There was a sense in which every offender at Thessalonica, every one of the 'busy-bodies,' was an enemy of the Church. He was an enemy, as breaking loose from its belief and from its recognised rules as to conduct. He was an enemy, as tempting others to follow his example and to fall out of the ranks. He was an enemy, as provoking the criticism of the surrounding community, and bringing shame upon the Church. He was an enemy, as weakening the Church both in regard to its solidarity and in regard to its capacity for aggressive work.

—Yet also a Brother.

In so far, then, as he was thus an enemy, he was to be dealt with by the Church. Yet, whilst he thus laid himself open to censure and to punishment, he could not by wrong-doing of this sort disrobe himself altogether of his old character. He

2 Thess. iii. 14, 15.

had been a brother indeed; and it might be that the Apostle's re-statement of the right belief as to the Coming of the Lord, and as to the personal conduct of His people would carry weight with him, and that the offender would purge himself of his offence. He was therefore to be dealt with hopefully, having a place for repentance left, if public censure should make him ashamed of his error. He was, in fact, not to be regarded as an enemy, in the sense of being deemed incapable of repentance, a hopeless reprobate with whom it was superfluous to reason, and upon whom admonition and pleading would alike be wasted.

The point of view to be taken is analogous to that of Our Lord's command, 'Love your enemies' (Matt. v. 44). The wrong-doer is not to be cast out of the thought and concern of those who had been his associates. St Paul, in another letter, wrote, 'If thine enemy hunger, feed him' (Rom. xii. 20), and the exclusive dealing to be put in force against these busy-bodies at Thessalonica would make a strange exception, if they were to be dealt with as open foes, and not reasoned with as erring brothers.

—To be Admonished as a Brother.

'Admonish him' and, moreover, 'as a brother' —that was the task set before the Church. The nature of the admonition might be suggested by

the reasoning and appeal of the Apostle. He would be told, with authority, the right view of the Lord's return, and the effects of such a view on the Christian's conduct. But the spirit of the action was, perhaps, more important than the words to be used. 2 Thess. iii. 14, 15.

'As a brother.' The offender was not to be deemed an outcast, formally expelled from the Church, but rather one with claims upon them; one still, as it were, of their kith and kin, still entitled to consideration. It is in such a spirit that the rebuke of offences needs to be undertaken. There are times when rebuke seems to put the right person in the wrong, because of the bitterness or the violence with which it is conveyed. It is forgotten that the true purpose of rebuke and of punishment is remedial. The offender is dealt with, not that Society or the injured individual may be revenged upon him, but that, whilst justice is vindicated, the wrong-doer may be won back to the path of right. The State seems to be learning this lesson; the individual needs to remember it also.

Judgment and Mercy.

To combine the administration of justice and the exercise of brotherly love is often difficult. But the difficulty grows less as we keep in mind the right aim of just punishment, and the claim which even the condemned wrong-doer has on

2 Thess. iii. 14, 15.

us still. And if any persons should be distinguished for their recognition of all this, it is those who claim to follow the Lord Christ. The worldly person, who refuses to help a man who has lost his character and repented, or the woman who has come to shame and repented, may claim that he is content with justice. But the Christian man must needs allow play for mercy also. Let him—whether others will or will not aid—be foremost in seeking to reclaim the lost and fallen; in smoothing their way for a return to an honest life; in helping those who are struggling with the difficulties created by their own sin; in other words, let him be careful to follow the example of his Lord, who still requires of His people that they should not only 'do justly' but also 'love mercy' (Mic. vi. 8), and be full not only of 'good fruits' but of 'mercy' too (James iii. 17).

There is one great reason why this principle should appeal to every one of us. In the sight of God all have sinned and come short of His glory (Rom. iii. 23). Standing alone, we are condemned. How shall we fare, if God deal not tenderly with us for the merits of Jesus Christ? We claim mercy; can we be unready to give it? If we will not deal with others as with brothers, can we ask God to deal with us as with sons? Let

us live in memory of the warning uttered by St James — 'he shall have judgment without mercy, that hath showed no mercy' (James ii. 13). 2 Thess. iii. 14, 15.

Suggestions for Prayer.

Let us remember—

(1) Our own needs, that God may deal not 'with us after our sins' (Ps. ciii. 10);

(2) Our own responsibility to others in the Church of Christ (1 Cor. xii. 26).

'That it may please Thee to bring into the way of truth all such as have erred, and are deceived;

'*We beseech Thee to hear us, good Lord.*

'That it may please Thee to strengthen such as do stand; and to comfort and help the weak-hearted; and to raise up them that fall; and finally to beat down Satan under our feet;

'*We beseech Thee to hear us, good Lord.*'

XXIX

PEACE FROM THE LORD OF PEACE

2 Thess. iii. 16.

Now the Lord of peace Himself give you peace always by all means. The Lord be with you all.

2 Thess. iii. 16.

Peace Promised.

It is easy to draw from the New Testament references to the Christian life as a fight. It is not less easy to mark the persistence of the promise of peace. 'My peace I give you' (John xiv. 27), said our Lord to His little flock; even when He forewarned them that in the world they would have tribulation (John xvi. 33). The idea was firmly laid hold of by St Paul, who never finds a difficulty in the apparent paradox of a life which is a struggle being nevertheless marked by an inward peace. He has not stood alone. Is it not the happy experience of every follower of the Lord that, real as the conflict is, the inward peace is not less real?

Its Source.

The *source* of this peace is in our Lord. He is the 'God of peace' (Rom. xv. 33; xvi. 20; 2 Cor. xiii. 11; Phil. iv. 9). Peace should reign amongst those who follow Him. Peace is a characteristic

of His message and His kingdom. 'On earth, peace,' was the angelic song at His birth. The offer to mankind is 'the Gospel of peace.' Strife between brethren, strife between Churches, however caused and however excused, is in itself an accusation against our consistency. Yet it sometimes looks as though Christian people found it more easy to maintain peace with the world than peace with one another. 2 Thess. iii. 16.

Now the peace St Paul desires for his converts is unlimited in time and circumstance; it is peace 'at all times in all ways' (R.V.) But certainly he was referring to the circumstances of the Thessalonian Church. We may infer, then, that he desired *peace between the brethren* of that Church—doubtless to be reached through the removal of the causes of the difference, even though the exercise of discipline should be necessary. The leaders at Thessalonica, whilst seeking to remove the offence of which St Paul wrote, would try to bring about peace. It might not be an easy task, but it had to be undertaken, and as a matter of duty. Peace in the Church.

Having read St Paul's letter, we feel quite sure that he did not desire peace at any price. He would not countenance the disgraceful peace secured by the sacrifice of truth and of duty. He could not ask 'the Lord of Peace' to give peace —But not at any Price.

2 Thess. iii. 16.

—and to all—where men denied the faith, or wantonly mutilated the faith, or lived bringing discredit upon the faith. He hoped for, and prayed for, and worked for peace by the restoration of the wrong-doer, peace in the hearts of those who had done their duty, though a hard and painful duty; peace in a community really at one again, and not in a community where each man was a law unto himself. 'The Lord be with you all.' To cry peace where there is no peace is not to seek peace by the right way. Let us flee from the temptation to win temporary ease from strife by concessions that only prepare for future disorders. The task laid on us may entail a struggle; but it must be faced. The Christian may not 'dream . . . of quiet life,' for 'care finds the careless outside.' So to each of us Keble says—

> '—— more wise to vow
> Thine heart entire to Faith's pure strife;
> So Peace will come, thou knowest not when or how.'

The Way of Peace.

Yet all disorder — every fact which makes against peace — points us to the one remedy. Would we 'seek peace and ensue it,' more especially amongst brethren? Then 'back to Christ' must be our motto. The nearer we are to Him—seeing, like disciples in the upper room, the crucified but risen Lord, marking the prints

of the nails, the wounds made 'for our transgressions'—the less we shall fall away from His Word and be at strife. 2 Thess. iii. 16.

Suggestions for Prayer.

Let St John provide two texts for our prayers: 'This commandment have we from Him, That he who loveth God love his brother also' (1 John iv. 21).

'Let us not love in word, neither in tongue; but in deed and in truth' (1 John iii. 18).

'O Almighty God, Who alone canst order the unruly wills and affections of sinful men; Grant unto Thy people, that they may love the thing which Thou commandest, and desire that which Thou dost promise; that so, among the sundry and manifold changes of the world, our hearts may surely there be fixed, where true joys are to be found; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.'

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XXX

FAREWELL

2 Thess. iii. 17, 18.

The salutation. . . . Amen.

2 Thess. iii. 17, 18. Last Words.

The letter is ended. The Apostle attests it. There must be no doubt as to its authority (ii. 2). He will leave no room for error or falsification if he can help it. Souls are at stake. They are precious things, and he will omit no care in dealing with them. And so, with his formal signature and a last benediction, he ends his message.

The Lord's Grace Our Strength.

And the final word speaks of the grace, the favour, of the Lord. That was the first and the last need of his converts. Were they in danger from open foes? The Lord could protect them. Were they confronted by false doctrine? The Lord could keep them in the path of truth. Were they tried by strange errors in conduct? The Lord could keep the feet of His saints. Did they need wisdom for dealing with mistaken brethren? The Lord could supply all their need. His grace was sufficient for them (2 Cor. xii. 9). Let but the favour of God be with them, and all

would yet be well. And the Apostle invokes this divine support, guidance, mercy for all—for the weak as well as the strong, for the erring whom he desired to see reclaimed as well as for those who stood firm. 'The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.' 2 Thess. iii. 17, 18.

The goodness of God is not less abundant towards ourselves; 'the riches of His grace' (Eph. i. 7) are not less ample; still 'unto every one of us is given grace according to the measure of the gift of Christ' (Ephes. iv. 7); still from His fullness all His children receive 'grace for grace,' unceasingly renewed (John i. 16).

The Personal Message of the Bible.

Can we part from this Epistle—distinctive and restricted as are its subjects—and not feel its wealth of application to our own personal needs? Always and everywhere in Holy Scripture there is something for those who would read that they may hear a message from God. Through a Paul or some one centuries before St Paul the Holy Spirit is speaking. The scenes and personages and facts may be distant, but the history, the message is for us to-day.

And the wealth of guidance so offered to us is inexhaustible. No man, no human circumstances seem unprovided for. An anonymous

2 Thess. iii. 17, 18.

preface to a Bible of 1594 invites the reader thus to such a personal study of Holy Scripture—

'Here is the spring where waters flow,
To quench our heat of sin;
Here is the tree where truth doth grow,
To lead our lives therein;
Here is the judge that stints the strife,
When men's devices fail;
Here is the head that feeds the life
Which death cannot assail.
The tidings of salvation dear
Comes to our ears from hence;
The fortress of our faith is here;
The shield of our defence.
Then be not like the hog that hath
A pearl at his desire,
And takes more pleasure in the trough
And wallowing in the mire.
Read not this book in any case
But with a single eye:
Read not, but first desire God's grace,
To understand thereby.
Pray still in faith with this respect
To fructify therein;
That knowledge may bring this effect,
To mortify thy sin.
Then happy thou in all thy life,
Whatso to thee befalls;
Yea, doubly happy shalt thou be
When God by death thee calls.'

And so, having read, let us pray to our God for that upon which such an Epistle plainly sets so great a value—

'That it may please Thee to give us an heart to love and dread Thee, and diligently to live after Thy Commandments; 2 Thess. iii. 17, 18.

'*We beseech Thee to hear us, good Lord.*'

THE END.

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